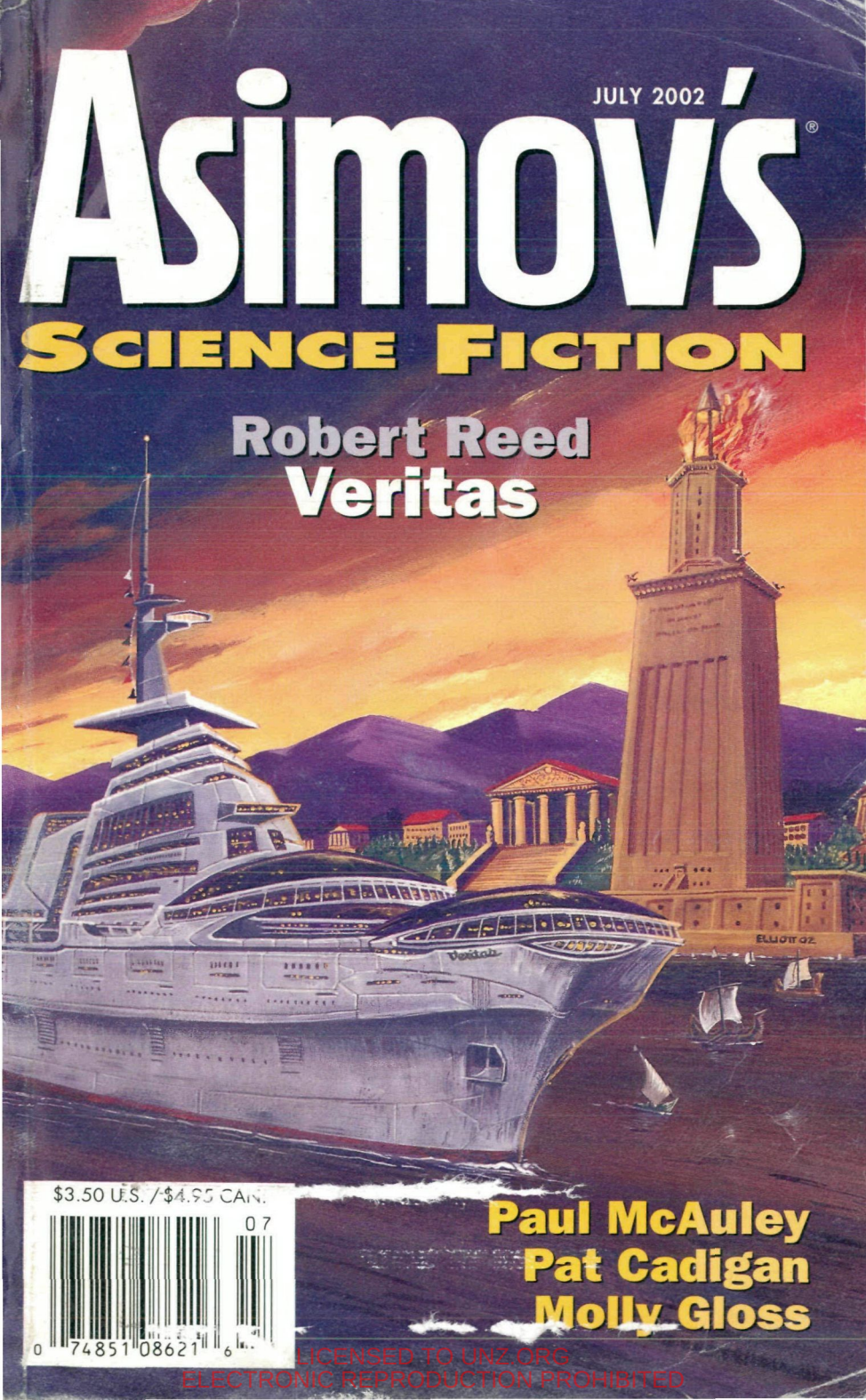

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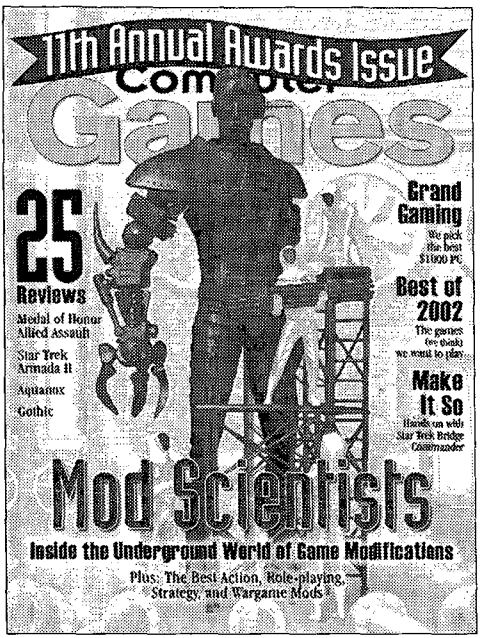

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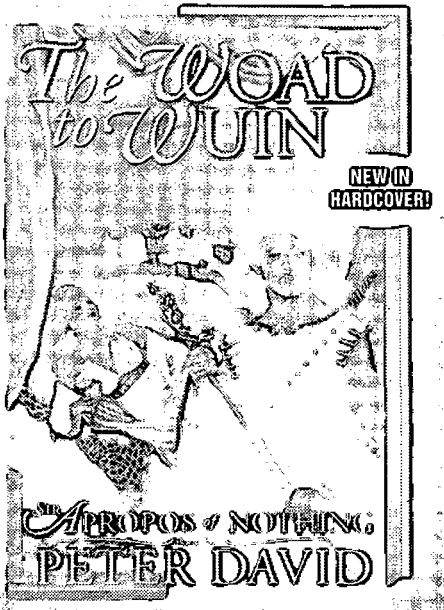

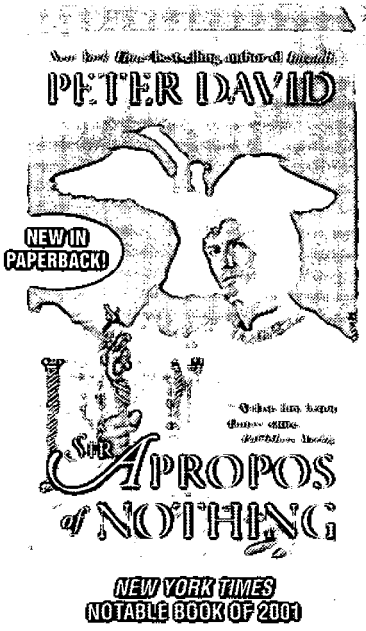

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

HOW TO WRITE

A few weeks ago, at a dinner party at the home of Charles N. Brown of *Locus,* the young woman seated next to me told me that she was studying my recently reissued anthology *Science Fiction 101,* because she intended to write science fiction herself and wanted to learn all she could about how to get her career launched.

"That's easy," I told her jovially. "You don't even need to read the whole book. Just read Alfred Bester's 'Fondly Fahrenheit' and Cordwainer Smith's 'Scanners Live in Vain' and write a story that's as good as those two—that'll get your career going!"

I was just being playful, of course. Those two stories are essentially inimitable masterpieces, the Bester a paragon of story construction and exuberant style, the Smith an eerie adventure in visionary strangeness told with deceptive simplicity. Telling a novice writer that she should make it her goal to begin her career with stories on that level of quality makes no more sense than telling a rookie baseball player that a good way of attracting attention would be to break Mark McGwire's home-run record in his first season. Easy enough to say but next to impossible to do, and not really necessary, either. Trying to match the absolute summit of achievement in your chosen field right at the outset of your career is a worthy enough ambition, and now and again it can actually be done. (Roger Zelazny's Hall of Fame classic "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" was written close to the start of his career. Vonda L. McIntyre won a Nebula for one of her first published stories, "Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand." Ted Chiang won one for his very first, "Tower of Babylon." And, for that matter, "Scanners Live in Vain" was the first published story of Cordwainer Smith.) But there are other and more easily feasible ways to get yourself started as a science fiction writer.

Learning as much as you can about the craft of storytelling, for instance, and then producing solid, competent, perceptive, *honest* stories that reflect your individual view of the universe in general and the human condition in particular—that will get you into print, at least. The Hugos and Nebulas will follow eventually, or perhaps they won't—but let such things look after themselves. What you wanted to do was write and get published, right? Awards, fame, money, are all things to worry about later.

And in fact my *Science Fiction 101* was intended to help just such people as my dinnertable neighbor that night at the *Locus* headquarters. (It was first published in 1987 under the title, *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder,* and I will shamelessly tell you that the publisher of the new edition is iBooks, Inc. and the price is $14.)

The book opens with a long autobiographical essay in which I describe precisely what it was like to be a young would-be writer yearning to get his start, fifty-odd years ago. Why, I wondered then, did people like Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Jack Williamson, and Henry Kuttner sell every word of fiction they wrote, whereas the pitiful little stories I

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was sending to the magazines came back with the speed of light? "They, so it seemed to me, were the elect. They were the ones who had been admitted to the sanctuary, while I stood on the outside glumly peering in. Why? I thought it was because they knew some special Secret, some fundamental trick of the trade, that was unavailable to me." And I devote the rest of my introductory piece to the tale of my quest to learn the wonderful secret of writing stories that some science fiction magazine would be willing to publish.

The first step, I decided, was to read a book on How to Write Fiction. Off I went to the library and found one such book that had already been recommended to me: Thomas H. Uzzell's *Narrative Technique: A Practical Course in Literary Psychology*, a book first published in 1923 that for a long time was the standard textbook on plot construction.

As I say in my introduction to *Science Fiction 101*, the Uzzell textbook terrified me: "I'm utterly certain that I put the book aside with a sinking feeling in my stomach. The art of fiction seemed as complicated and difficult to master as the art of brain surgery, and plainly you had to learn all the rules before the editors would let you through the door. Violate even one of Uzzell's commandments and it would be immediately apparent to any editor that the manuscript before him was the work of an incompetent. . . . I felt I could no more manage to write a proper story than I could walk on water."

I have a copy of Uzzell on my desk right now: 510 closely packed pages, dealing in the most minute detail with every aspect of story construction: the emotional purpose of a story, the effects it should achieve, the materials out of which it is built. There were chapters on "the character story," "the complication story," "the thematic story," "the atmos-

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phere story," and, most horrific of all, "the multi-phase story." The reader was offered instruction in such things as "technique of fusing effects," "importance of two ideals," "thematic narratives didactic and dramatic," and "general formula for dramatic intensity." And each chapter ended with an appalling set of homework assignments, more grueling than anything I had to deal with then in my real-world existence as a high-school junior.

Thoroughly intimidated, I put Uzzell aside and tried to puzzle out the secret of writing fiction on my own. "That seemed a better way to learn," I wrote. "Uzzell was only confusing and frightening me with his hundreds of pages of how-to-do-it manual. Besides, I hated the idea of doing all those end-of-chapter exercises. So I began to study the stories in the current issues of the SF magazines with passionate intensity. I concentrated on the lesser magazines, the ones that ran simple stories by not-so-famous writers, and I took those stories apart and stared at the pieces, thinking, This is an opening paragraph, This is how dialog is managed, This is as much exposition as you can get away with before the reader gets bored."

And it worked. I will not keep you in further suspense: I did indeed learn how to write publishable fiction, close to fifty years' worth of it by now, and the way I did it was to study other stories, figure out what made them work, and apply those principles to stories of my own invention. In *Science Fiction 101* I reprinted thirteen of the stories that I studied—thirteen of the best science fiction stories ever written—and followed each one with an essay of my own discussing the particular tactics that each writer had used to achieve the effects that made his (or in one case, her) story so effective.

It's a pretty good book, taken simply as an anthology: along with the Bester and Smith stories, there are gems like C.M. Kornbluth's "The Little Black Bag," Frederik Pohl's "Day Million," C.L. Moore's "No Woman Born," James Blish's "Common Time," and more, by Damon Knight, Robert Sheckley, Philip K. Dick, and others, an awesome group of stories that serve admirably as prototypes of what great science fiction ought to be. Anyone who wants to be a science fiction writer should indeed study them carefully, not with any hope (at least at first) of matching their quality, but for the sake of seeing what level of attainment it's possible to reach within our field.

Although I still think that the best way to learn how to write science fiction is by studying the best science fiction you can find and striving to extract fundamental principles of story creation from what you read, it can also be very helpful to read an established writer's technical analyses of other writers' published work. That's why I appended an essay of my own to each of the stories reprinted in *SF 101* that discussed very closely the narrative strategies that make those stories work as well as they do. You won't learn how to write publishable fiction simply by reading those essays, but if writing professionally is your goal they will, I'm quite sure, serve as useful teaching supplements to the stories themselves.

A few other books that I read in the early phases of my career come to mind also. Two that are worth searching out were written by outstanding SF writers whose stories I used in *Science Fiction 101*—Damon Knight and James Blish. Knight's *In Search of Wonder* is a lively and often blistering discussion of well-known science fiction novels of the 1940s and 1950s; Blish's *The Issue at Hand* is an equally scathing

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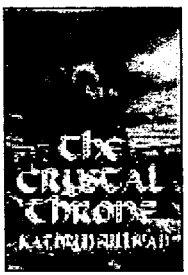
by Kathryn Sullivan



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analysis of SF magazine stories of the same era. Even if you aren't familiar with all of the works discussed, you will find Blish and Knight postulating certain technical standards for the writing of science fiction that all beginning writers would do well to think about.

Then there's Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* which, though ostensibly about playwriting, will tell you everything that old Thomas Uzzell was trying to teach about story construction, putting it in a far less intimidating manner. And, finally, H.D.F. Kitto's *Greek Tragedy,* a book I read and re-read when I was in college—and if you wonder how a study of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides will help you learn how to write successful science fiction, you'll find the answer in my introduction to *Science Fiction 101.*

What about that great Secret, which, so it seemed to me fifty years ago, Asimov and Kuttner and Heinlein and Williamson knew, and I didn't? I did learn it, finally, didn't I?

Well, yes and no. I can only quote my own words on that from the introduction to *Science Fiction 101*:

"The secret of the Secret is that it doesn't exist. There are many things that you must master if you hope to practice the art and craft of writing, but they are far from secret, nor do they add up to one single great Secret. You just go on, doing your best, living and reading and thinking and studying and searching for answers, using everything that you've learned along the way and hoping that each new story is deeper and richer than the one before."

There you have it. Editor Dozois is waiting to see those masterpieces, now. ○

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Sheila Williams

The 2001 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

Isaac Asimov Award winners and judges (from left to right): Sheila Williams, Lena DeTar, Karina Sumner-Smith, Amy Beth Forbes, Thomas Seay, Gary R. Porter and Rick Wilber

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Once again, the Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Story Writing was bestowed at the Conference on the Fantastic in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Each year, Asimov Award Administrator and co-judge Rick Wilber, removes all names from the submissions to the contest. Gardner Dozois and I give the finalists a blind read and then we choose the top stories. Thus, we were surprised to discover that we were quite familiar with this year's winner. Two years ago, Lena DeTar of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, was both an honorable mention and the second runner-up for the award. Last year, Lena was an honorable mention and the first runner-up. This year she told Rick that she was worried about hogging the award, but he assured her that each of her stories would stand anonymously on its own merits. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsors the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew the author in for an all-expense paid weekend. At a banquet on Saturday, March 23, 2002, I presented Lena with a certifi-

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cate and a check for $500 from the magazine for her story "Making Waves." In addition, as this year's second runner-up (for her story "The Dying of the Light"), Lena received a one-year subscription to *Asimov's*.

Thomas Seay was our first runner-up. A senior at Georgia Tech studying science, technology, and culture, and a 2001 graduate of Clarion, he received his award for his tale "Self-Defense." Thomas will receive a two-year complimentary subscription to *Asimov's* for the story.

We had three honorable mentions. One, Gary R. Porter of St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, received his award for "Judge and Jury." Gary is working on a degree in education, and is an avid reader of Joe Haldeman and other hard SF writers. At the banquet he was delighted to share his table with his favorite author.

Another honorable mention, Karina Sumner-Smith, was also a Canadian. Karina is a English major at York University in Toronto, Ontario, and a 2001 Clarion graduate. She received her certificate for "Loving the Bomb."

Amy Beth Forbes, an English major at Michigan State University and another 2001 Clarion grad, received an honorable mention for her story "Fire Water." Amy recently founded a lit zine, *Turbo Charged Fortune Cookie,* with our 2000 Asimov Award winner, Beth Adele Long. We were pleased to see Beth, along with all of this year's finalists, at the conference.

Authors in attendance included Joan Aiken, Brian Aldiss, Suzy McKee Charnas, Molly Gloss, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, John Kessel, Daniel Keyes, David Lunde, Patricia McKillip, Peter Straub, and Tim Sullivan.

Last year's winning story by Mark Jacobsen, "Conquering Europa," is up on on our website—*www.asimovs.com.*

Please join Lena, Mark, Beth, and many of our past winners at an online chat at *www.scifi.com* on July 9, 2002, at 9 PM EST.

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media. The award is also supported by the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

We are actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is December 16, 2002. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a $10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. Checks should be made out to the Asimov Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please remove your name from each story.

Before entering the contest, please contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

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Next year's winner will be announced at the 2003 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, and on our website. ○

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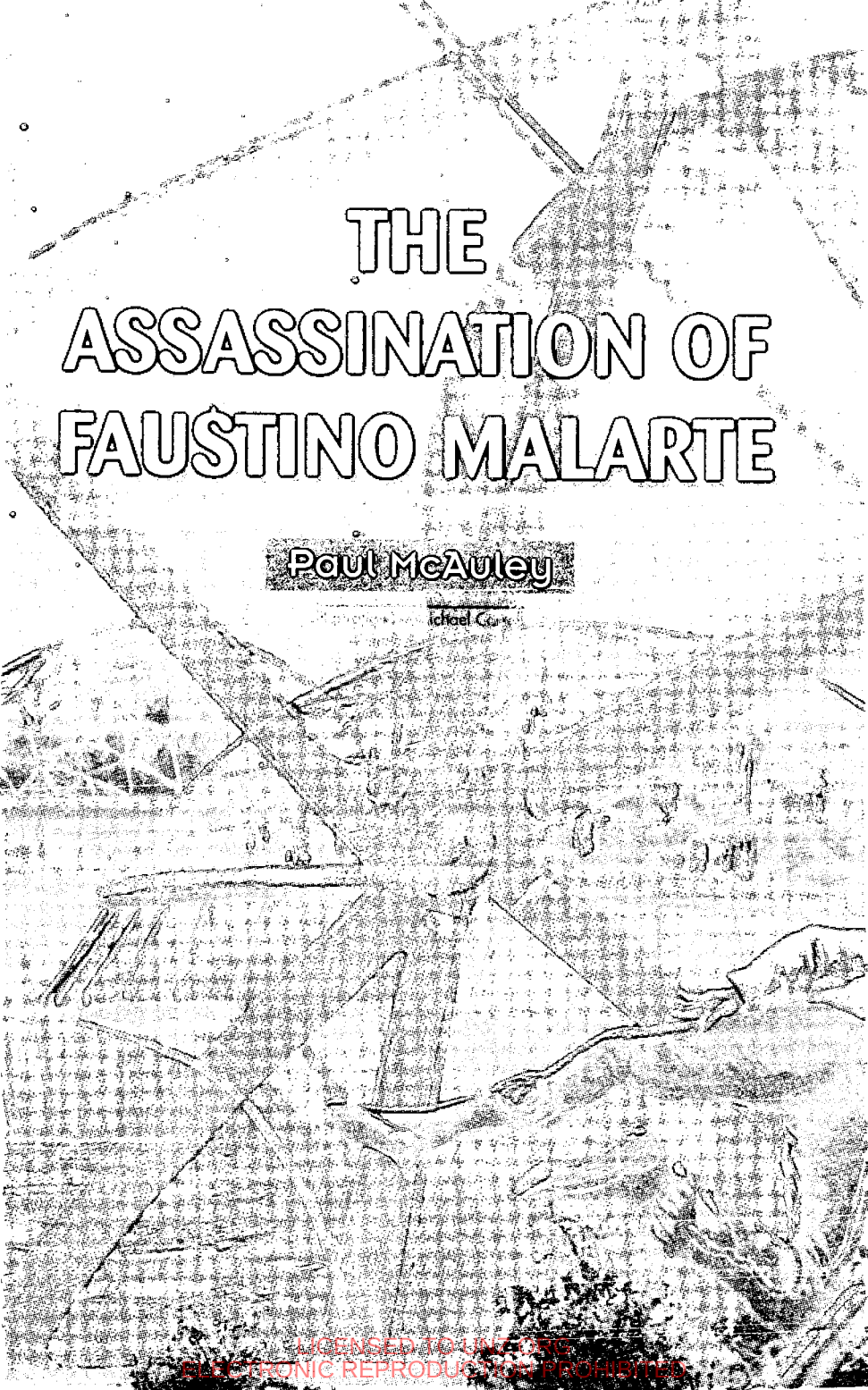

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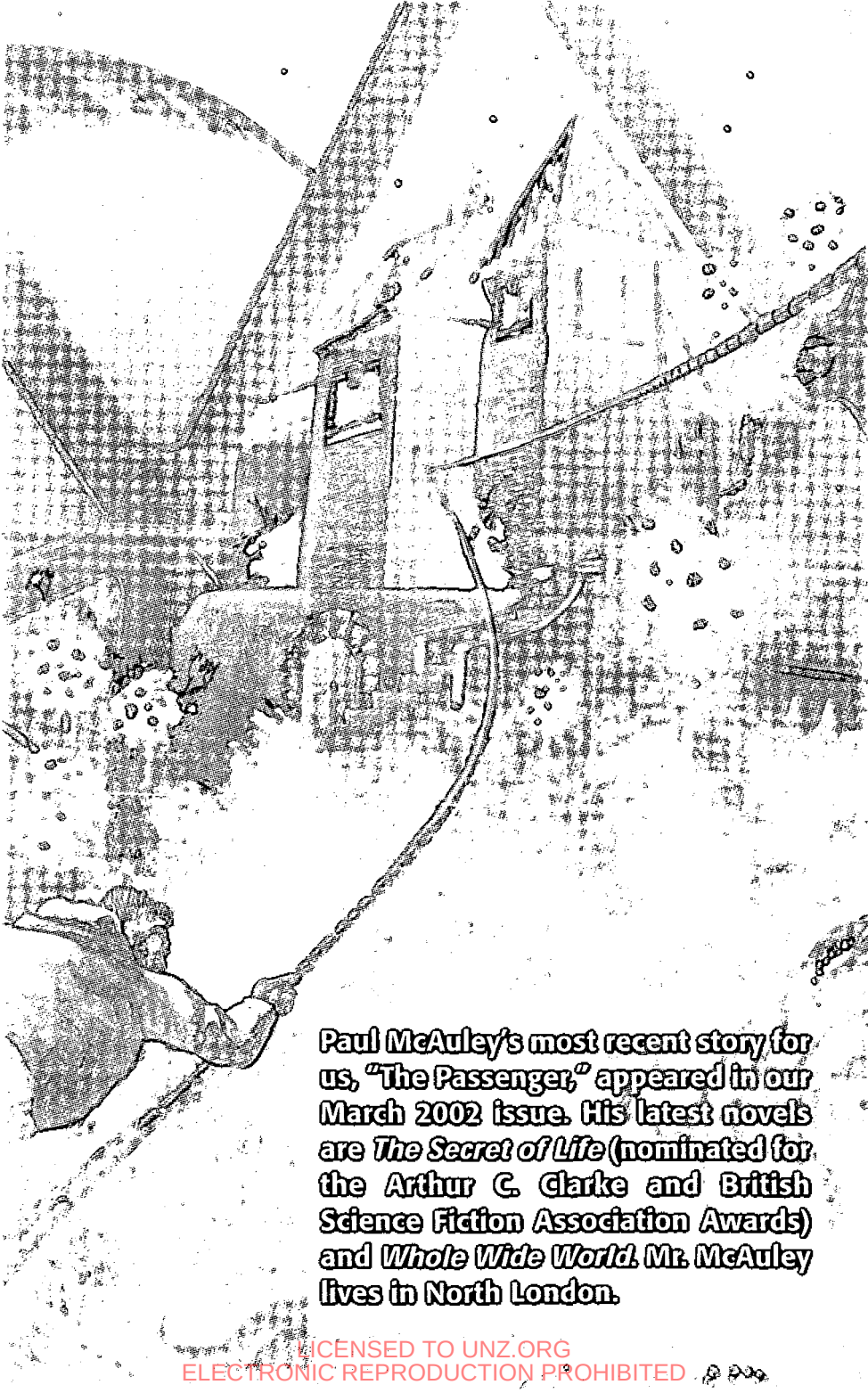

Paul McAuley's most recent story for us, "The Passenger," appeared in our March 2002 issue. His latest novels are *The Secret of Life* (nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke and British Science Fiction Association Awards) and *Whole Wide World*. Mr. McAuley lives in North London.

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On the day the assassin was programmed to kill him, Colonel Faustino Malarte woke as usual from a dream of falling. He was alone in his sleeping niche. The woman was gone, his phone was ringing, his heart and head were pounding, and his legs were tangled in bloodstained spidersilk sheets—perhaps that was why, in his dream, he had been bound hand and foot as with swooning slowness he tumbled past the ice cliffs of Camelot Chasma, the sun a chill diamond pinned to the center of the black sky, deep shadows far below.

His mother, who had a reputation for riddling auguries and omens from dreams, said that dreams of falling were about death; that if in your dream you smashed into the ground before waking, you would die in the real world at the same moment, and your soul would be forever bound to your rotting corpse. Amongst Faustino's scattered thoughts, as he tried to map the extent of his hangover, with the sharp residue of snuff pricking the bridge of his nose and the phone indignantly drilling the air, was the notion that since he had escaped death in his dream he would surely escape death in real life. The assassin would be caught; his plan would succeed; he would buy back his family's honor and leave this insignificant iceball forever.

"Take the message," he told the house, certain that the call would be from Todd Krough, but the house told him that he was not being paged on its com system, and Faustino realized that the infernal racket was the high-pitched warble of his own official stealth-proofed phone, which was sewn into the lapel of his jacket, which lay with his trousers in a puddle of white cloth on the floor. He was pretty sure that his deputy was going to be on the other end, which meant that (1) it was not going to be good news, and (2) it would keep ringing until he got up and answered it.

Even after two years in Mimas's microgravity, Faustino was still as clumsy as any incomer fresh off the mass mover. He lost his balance when he swung out of the sleeping niche, tumbled as lightly as a feather across the egg-shaped room, and barely managed to catch hold of a double handful of the carpet's crisp green blades before he slammed headfirst against the wall. He rolled onto his back, dizzy and out of breath, and lay there until he was certain that he was not going to throw up. The ceiling showed a simulation of a predawn sky somewhere on Earth, and a carpet of green, half-life polymer grew up the curved walls, giving him the illusion that he was cupped in a deep, grassy hollow. A chill breeze wafting over his bare skin. Stars pricking a purple sky in which the woman's scribbles were barely visible. The shrill chorus of his stealth phone. He hitched himself across the floor like an overgrown toddler, pulled the jacket into his lap, and ran his thumb down the lumpy braid that edged its wide lapel.

"It is done," Todd Krough said.

"Christ's balls, man," Faustino said, his blood suddenly fizzing with spiders and amphetamine. "You shouldn't be using this channel!"

"It is done," Todd Krough said again.

"It's done?"

"Your problem, it is disposed of. Perhaps you require the details, Colonel. Perhaps you would like me to file a report."

"Of course I don't want the fucking details! Not over the phone, anyway. I'll talk to you face to face. I mean, it is safe for me to go out now, isn't it?"

"I told you that your problem was disposed of. The trap worked exactly as intended."

"Then there really was—"

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Even though he had turned his house into a fortress, Faustino had not until this moment quite believed that someone had set an assassin after him.

"I have done my part, Colonel, as I said I would. I sent a message through the appropriate channel, and I have been waiting for you ever since."

"Waiting?"

Faustino looked at the watch tattooed on his wrist. He should have been woken more than two hours ago. The bitch must have reset the house system again.

"I have been waiting," Todd Krough's killingly patient voice said, "for exactly one hour. You did not respond when, three hours ago, I sent a message with the good news and details of our rendezvous, but I charitably ascribed that to the shocking lack of good manners you so often exhibit. However, it is now quite clear that you have no intention of attending this very important meeting, at which I planned to seal our agreement. I hope, Colonel, you have not had second thoughts. I hope that this does not mean that you have no faith or trust in my methods and my word of honor. Because if that is the case, I must say in all honesty that I would take the slur on my integrity very badly indeed."

"Of course I trust you."

It was a good thing the bitch wasn't here, Faustino thought—he would have been tempted to kill her, and although as head of security on Mimas he could easily square the death of a convicted prisoner, it would have led to all kinds of complications.

He said, "I've been incredibly busy, getting loose ends tied up. There's still plenty of time before the shuttle leaves. I'll be ready in an hour. You can—"

"If you are worried about your safety, Colonel, I suggest you look at the message I sent to you. It will assure you that it is quite safe for you to leave your house."

"Where should I—"

"Find somewhere discreet in the lower levels of the main dome, and make yourself comfortable," Todd Krough said. "One of my men will bring you to me posthaste."

Faustino asked the house if it had any messages for him; it said that it had received one three hours ago.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"You instructed me not to disturb you."

"I did no such—" Then Faustino realized just how comprehensively the woman had meddled with the house's systems. "That bitch. Give me the message."

It was a compilation of anodyne news clips from Greater Brazil, playing in a cube of virtual light a meter in front of his face. Faustino found the encryption stick in the pocket of his jacket, waved it through the projection, and told the house to play the clip again.

This time it was a crude montage of mismatched spycam shots, a homemade snuff movie. A mild-faced middle-aged man shot with shark-like swiftness into a pod somewhere in one of Camelot's industrial levels, threw himself at another man trussed to a crossbrace and tore him apart with teeth and hands and feet, murderer and murderee disappearing in a fog of blood and bloody fragments. A jump-cut to a close-up of the murderer, his face a red wet mask, plucking at darts sticking in his neck and chest before shuddering and going limp; another jump-cut to pale, skeletal Todd Krough

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elegantly relaxed in a sling chair, telling Faustino that, as he could see, the assassin had taken the bait, and they must now meet at once.

When Faustino had first heard the rumor that an assassin had been programmed to kill him, he had thought that it was nothing more than a bit of black propaganda, a crude effort to make him panic, to fuck up his deal with Todd Krough. The gangster's ruthless, meteoric rise after the Quiet War had made him plenty of enemies on Mimas and the other moons of the Saturn system, and Faustino had enemies too, not all of them tweaks. But then, just two days ago, Faustino's security force had confirmed that a dedicated vat-grown assassin had indeed infiltrated Camelot; investigation of the last batch of incomers had turned up an anomaly in the records of one man, who had vanished after scorching clean his capsule room and leaving a crude death's head and a date—today's date, the day Faustino was due to depart for Paris, Dione—scrawled in blood on the door. Faustino had locked himself in his house and surrounded it with a squad of troopers and several dozen drones, and Todd Krough had called in a favor from a grey market gene wizard. Now the trap, baited with an innocent victim treated to a crude cosmetic job and infected with tailored bacteria that gave him an exact duplicate of Faustino's body odor, had been sprung, and the assassin had been neutralized.

"Play it again," Faustino told the house, and at the same moment the stealth phone rang.

This time it *was* Faustino's gloomy deputy, Gabriel Blanca. "Sri Hong-Owen wants to talk with you, boss. I know you don't want to leave your house, what with the assassin, so I told her that you had to attend to some very important business. But she said that she would send someone to find you, and I thought I had better warn you."

"You're right about the business," Faustino said. "As a matter of fact, I have to go out right now."

"You're going out, boss? What about the assassin?"

"Forget about the assassin. As for talking to the witch, forget about that, too. I have to take a little trip, Gabriel."

"A trip, boss? Is that wise?"

"A trip, Gabriel, to Paris, Dione. In six hours I'll have escaped from this miserable ball of ice. So, she is your problem, not mine."

"She said that she has made an important discovery, boss. And she was serious about sending someone to find you. Perhaps you should delay your trip, and find out what she wants. You can stay in your house, and meanwhile we will continue to search for the assassin."

Faustino, sprawled naked on the pseudograss carpet, stinking of sex and booze, could in his mind's eye clearly see his deputy's mournful face—his cap of curly black hair, the hyphen of his razor-trimmed moustache, his reproachful, poached-egg eyes—and felt a squirm of unease in his gut, a little blurt of acid. He could never decide if Gabriel Blanca was a model of rectitude, and too stupid or too unimaginative to see what was going on under his nose, or if he chose to ignore it because he didn't want to get involved.

"I won't be at home," Faustino said, "and I won't be coming into the office, except very briefly, when I expect you to keep everyone and anyone away from me. After that, I'll be on the shuttle to Dione. So you see that I don't have any time for this nonsense, Gabriel. You'll just have to handle this yourself."

"She said that she wanted you to see what she had found. She was very clear about that."

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Faustino groaned. "This has to be about the cave full of vacuum organisms. We've both read her reports, Gabriel. We both know that she hasn't found anything interesting."

One of the AIs monitoring Mimas's communication traffic had intercepted and decrypted reports sent by Sri Hong-Owen's field crew to her laboratory in orbit above Titan. They had discovered and mapped a vast underground complex, and had located an entire ecosystem of vacuum organisms designed by Avernus, who had been the pre-eminent gene wizard in the solar system before the Quiet War, and was now its most wanted war criminal. Faustino had paid a professor of biology in the University of Brasilia a considerable fee to assess the tedious details of vacuum organism metabolism, only to be told that there was nothing novel—that is, nothing that was not already patented. Faustino suspected that these anodyne reports were a smokescreen, that Sri Hong-Owen was holding back the good stuff for herself, but she ran a notoriously tight crew that was impossible to infiltrate, and hiring black bag mercenaries to stage a hit-and-run job would have been horribly expensive. Besides, he was busy enough with his own schemes, and most especially with the plan he had cooked up with Todd Krough.

Gabriel Blanca said, "She didn't say what it was about, boss. Only that she wanted you to see something."

"You didn't think to ask, of course."

"I did not ask," Gabriel Blanca said primly, "because we are not supposed to know anything about it."

Faustino was picking at a patch of dried blood—the woman's blood—on his thigh. Black flakes fell slowly into the wiry turf of half-life polymer that would, by and by, absorb them. He said, "No doubt she's found something that she thinks is important, but will anyone else care? Do I care? I think not. She's an obsessive. Give her just one moment of your attention, and she'll never let you go."

"I only tell you what she said, boss," Gabriel Blanca said stubbornly. "That it was important, and that you had to see it for yourself. Perhaps you should go. At least you would be safe from the assassin."

Faustino clutched the back of his aching head. Bristly hair rasped under his palm. He had the wild idea that if he squeezed hard enough his headache would spray into the air like black milk. He said, "I have business to attend to. I have a shuttle to catch. Stall the witch. Say anything you like, but stall her. I don't have time for her nonsense."

He had to talk with Todd Krough, calm the tweak down, soothe his affronted sense of honor, and extract the first tranche of the fee. He had to arrange the transfer of credit through a web of virtual middlemen to his anonymous account on the Bourse. He had to go to his office and pick up the bribe for the general in charge of traffic control, and he had to catch the shuttle to Dione. For a moment, contemplating the extent of these interlocking tasks gave him a bad case of claustrophobic dread.

Gabriel Blanca was protesting that he didn't have the authority to deal with Sri Hong-Owen.

"I'm giving you the authority," Faustino said. "Imagine that I'm already on Dione, that I'm in Paris, strolling beside one of its famous rivers, in one of its famous parks. In gravity where you can actually walk upright, as God intended. You're in charge, Gabriel, so you will have to deal with the witch. Meanwhile, I will do you the favor of praying that she returns to Titan as soon as she can."

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"I'll note your transfer of authority," Gabriel Blanca said stiffly.

"You do that," Faustino said, and switched off the phone and added, "Write it on a stick, Gabriel, and shove it up your ass."

He called for light and coffee, and when the house told him in its soft contralto that there was no coffee, remembered that in a moment of careless generosity last night he had allowed the woman to take it all in return for fulfilling the lubricious promises she had whispered in his ear. Real coffee was as good as Greater Brazilian dollars on the grey market.

"I can synthesize coffee," the house said.

"I'd rather drink yeast shit."

"As an alternative, I have chocolate or seven types of tea," the house said, and Faustino told it chocolate would be fine, remembering how the woman's quick clever mouth had planted lingering kisses on every centimeter of his skin, how she had looked at him across the hairy expanse of his torso with the sullen contempt that excited him so—even now his poor chafed penis grew in weight at the thought, a tender throb.

He'd managed to trick her into playing one of his little games last night—a game with his pistol, waving it in her face, setting it down between them, goading her into trying to use it. As usual, she had refused, and as usual he had worked her into a fine fury with inventively embellished war stories (he really was rather good at concocting disgusting details; next time, he should ask the house to make a recording), her quivering outrage inspiring him to even greater heights of invention, until at last, because it was the only way she could make him stop, she had made a grab for the pistol he had carefully left within reach. He took her on the instant the viral fit seized her; it was like riding a condemned prisoner when the first jolt of electricity struck. It was a pity that the loyalty virus, another of Todd Krough's little gifts, couldn't be made legal. There were thousands of prisoners rotting in the forced labor camps. One dose of virus, a session of indoctrination, and every trooper could have his own body servant.

Faustino asked the house to turn up the lights, and saw that the woman had added another drawing to the involuted scrawls that now stretched halfway across the low, curved ceiling of the sleeping chamber. She slept far less than he did: all tweaks seemed to need little sleep, surviving on strings of snatched catnaps. Often, after sex, she would swing into the day hammock and lie there doodling with a stylus gripped in hand or foot. She had elaborated a regular Sistine Chapel up there, although the sketches of flayed or bursting bodies and body parts skewered like grotesque flowers on branches or bits of broken machinery were more like a work by Goya that Faustino had once seen in the Prado than Michaelangelo's great murals. He remembered his father pointing out the gruesome details, telling him that this was the necessary cost of war, that this was what men sometimes had to do to other men. He remembered his father's grave, gravelly voice, his complex odor compounded of sweat, stale tobacco, sherry fumes and the polish of his black boots, the weight of his hand on his shoulder. His father had shot himself at his desk two weeks later, his web of debts and deceit unraveling far and wide, a court order sequestering the family estate spattered with his blood and brains.

Faustino had once asked the woman if these drawings were the kind of thing she had stenciled on pressure suits, and she'd given him one of her dark, contemptuous looks and said that it had been different before the war. This new bit of work was a skull born aloft on dove's wings that sprouted

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below its jaw; Faustino realized, as he pulled himself toward the shower, that the bony face was somehow his. Sublimation, that was what the brain doctors called it. The woman wanted so badly to kill him, and she couldn't, even with a charged pistol in her hand: the loyalty virus saw to that. All she could do was show him how much she wanted him dead, and that inspired him to greater cruelties, which made her hate him even more. Faustino liked to think that they were exquisitely matched.

In the shower capsule, he discovered that she had taken all his special soap beads again, the ones, delicately infused with frankincense and bergamot and mimosa, he had shipped in from the three-hundred-year-old shop in the exclusive arcade in Rio. What did she do with them? She certainly did not use them—she always came to him smelling of sour sweat, a calculated bit of defiance that was actually illegal in this fastidious city. All that was left were sachets of the pink, gritty soap synthesized by the foodmaker. And there was still black mold defining the edges of the capsule's door seal, even though he had told her about it—had *shown* her, pushing her face right up to it. She hadn't bothered to program the house mites to take care of it, although she had reset the capsule's temperature; it was so chilly his naked hide prickled with goose bumps, and he squealed when the shower's powerful fans threw a dense cold mist around him.

Black mold in the shower's airmask, too, he realized, as a musty, acrid taste filled his mouth. Well, it wouldn't kill him. The woman had once tried to poison him, but the virus had forced her to tell him all about it as soon as she had doctored the wine. Faustino had had a lot of fun with her that night, and the very next day she'd tried to get the house to suffocate him by gradually increasing the carbon dioxide content of the air while he slept. She'd had to wake him up so he could hear her strangled, weepy confession, and afterward they'd had a truly rousing session that had put her in the hospital for forty-eight hours.

Happy days.

Showered, shaven, medicated with aspirin and a tiny cup of bitter hot chocolate sprinkled with something that passably imitated cinnamon, the trench between his lower lip and teeth tingling with a dusting of snuff he'd dredged from the bottom of the wrap he'd consumed last night, Colonel Faustino Malarte felt a good deal more human when, after briefly talking to the AI in charge of Camelot's spycam network, he left his house for the last time. It was ten fifteen. The shuttle to Dione was due to depart in just under six hours; he had plenty of time to finish his business.

The first thing he did was tell the sergeant in command of the squad guarding his house that he did not want an escort. The sergeant knew better than to argue with his superior officer, but Faustino had only just passed through the sphere of security mesh when his phone rang. It was, of course, Gabriel Blanca.

"You really are going out, boss."

"Want do you want, Gabriel?"

"You have to tell me where you are going, and you have to go with an escort. Those are the standing orders."

"They are *my* standing orders. Cancel them."

"You do remember what day it is, boss."

"Even I would hardly forget the day I am supposed to be killed, Gabriel. But none of that matters now."

"Of course it matters."

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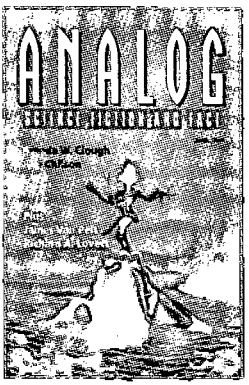

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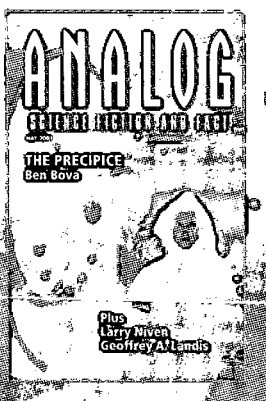

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"It doesn't matter because it isn't going to happen."

"You don't know that, boss," Gabriel Blanca said stubbornly. "If you insist on going out, you must have an escort."

"Leave the squad to watch the house if you want, but I'll have your head if anyone follows me. And don't waste any more time looking for the assassin, by the way. I can assure you that there's no need."

"Assassins were designed to be hard to find, boss. That's why they were so successful in the war. That's why we are watching you. That's why you should stay in your house until the matter is resolved."

Poor Gabriel Blanca. His plodding mind, trapped within the narrow confines of bureaucratic procedure, was entirely unable to think sideways, could never in a thousand years have come up with the cunning, albeit entirely illegal, ambush that had caught the assassin.

Faustino, swollen with secret amusement, said, "Assassins are terrible weapons, yes, and that is without doubt why one of our enemies hatched this pernicious rumor in the first place. Whisper that a rewired assassin is loose, then sit back and watch us go crazy as we chase around after a ghost. Trust me on this, Gabriel: there is no assassin. It's a trick. No doubt to divert us from something someone doesn't want us to know about."

"It isn't a trick, boss. It's very real. A man disappeared. He set off an incendiary charge in his room to foil our forensics. He left a message written in blood—"

"Really, Gabriel. That was nothing more than a bit of stage management to add to the lie."

"But, boss, this is the day—"

"I have work to do, Gabriel. Don't call me again, don't have me followed, and don't even bother trying to use the spycams to keep an eye on me. I've already had a word with the AI about that. I'll be at headquarters in a couple of hours."

Faustino's house was one of the finest in Camelot, confiscated from the eldest son of what had been, before the war, its richest family. It sat at the top of the leafiest of the little city's many domes, hidden from its neighbors by trees and bushes and vines that in the fractional gravity grew from hydroponic tubing in extravagant puffball explosions and cascading ridges dripping with flowers and fruit. As Faustino hauled himself toward the main cordway, he felt that he was swimming through a fantastic floral replica of a coral reef, the spheres and blunt-ended ovals of houses tucked away amongst hanging curtains of foliage like the Easter eggs his mother used to hide in the garden of the estate, constellations of suspensor lamps burning overhead, and Saturn a swollen storm cloud tilted beyond the spiderweb of the dome's fullerene struts and diamond panes. A gang of gardeners were trimming a puffball of shaggy cypresses, like fish grazing at a great green cloud of algae. Before the war, tribes of tweaked rats had taken care of the plantings, but most of the incomers couldn't tolerate the idea of vermin swarming freely about their homes and businesses, and the rats had been culled by a tailored plague. Faustino missed them. Their fur had been patterned as gorgeously as Persian carpets, and it had been fun, at the end of the day, to take pot-shots at them with a wire gun from the terrace of his new house. The bloom of blood and flesh when an explosive needle hit one of the little fuckers! Ah, the good old days just after the war, when everything had been free and easy. There had been no need for all this black-bagging and finicky intrigue back then. If you wanted something done, you arranged

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it directly. It was in its way a more honest time. Back then, Colonel Faustino Malarte could have arrested a crook like Todd Krough, confiscated his business and had him shot for treason, and no questions would have been asked. Now, he was forced to make deals with him.

Below the busy cordways that girdled the equator of Camelot's main dome, the lighting was dimmer, the air colder, the air conditioning noisier. Pipes leaked steam that condensed into drifting clouds of cold droplets, sucked this way and that by humming fans. The fat resin and plastic cylinders of studios and workshops were suspended like bowerbird nests amongst islands of dark green foliage, complex tangles of electrical and fiberoptic cables and service pipes strung between them. Discreet holographic signs hung shimmering in dim air that smelled of solvents, paint, and hot metal and plastic, and tingled with the greedy hiss of suction pumps and the stuttering blurt of power tools.

Faustino found an open air café beside a fall of jasmine and golden ivy, and ordered up a sticky pastry and a beaker of coffee, making sure the counterman prepared the coffee with a triple helping of real ground beans. It went without saying that he did not pay; he did not have to pay for anything in the city. He commandeered the café's phone and told Todd Krough where he was, cut off the man's impertinent bluster mid-sentence, and then hooked himself to a sling chair, sipping coffee and watching the street scene like a benevolent emperor.

Camelot was famous for its pressure suits, and this was where they were made, along with sleds, air plants, reaction pistols, tethers, and a hundred specialist tools for vacuum work. Tweaks came from all over the Saturn system to buy custom-made p-suits and accessories. They made a big deal about authentic hand-crafted artifacts. They valued things not just for their utility but for the intrinsic worth of skilled labor and artistry, could argue for hours about the particular merits of a single artisan. Another district, in the dome west of this one, specialized in the growth and quickening of suit liners. A third, devoted to the decoration of p-suits, was where the woman had worked before the war, painting whatever it was she had painted before she had started specializing in skulls and filleted corpses. Baalambs and bluebirds perhaps. Pre-war pastoral scenes. The only time Faustino had ever seen her look interested in anything at all had been when he'd taken her to his office to show off his prize, a p-suit chestplate decorated with the third of Munk's *Seven Views of Saturn's Rings*. Faustino was going to use it to bribe the general in charge of traffic control in the Saturn system. The man already had two of them; three more were in museums on Earth; only God knew what had happened to the seventh. Faustino remembered the way the woman's gaze had moved over the painting—her look so dreamily intense that for the pleasure of seeing it vanish he'd immediately switched off the lights and ordered the safe to shut itself away. She'd told him that he didn't deserve to own it, and had pretended not to listen to the amusing story of how the piece had come into Faustino's possession after its owner had committed ritual suicide at the end of the Quiet War.

That new drawing she had left on the ceiling—was it really a death's-head portrait of him? Why had she done it? A warning? A malign joke? She knew about the assassin and the promise he had scrawled in blood; Faustino had told himself he wouldn't tell her, and then he'd gotten drunk and told her anyway. A gengineered killing machine is after you, she'd said, so what? It didn't impress someone who had spent every second of the Quiet War's

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hundred and twenty days wondering if a missile or a chunk of rock was about to smash her city flat.

As Faustino perched in the sling chair, sweating into yesterday's slightly soiled uniform as he sipped his coffee, he noticed that many of the tweaks who swam or glided past glanced sidelong at him, and three were openly watching him from the mouth of one of the studios a hundred meters down the cordway. Eyes big and dark in pale faces, sly whispers. How tweaks liked to stare at incomers—especially at him, one of the most important people in their miserable little city, which for all its vaunted ecological design and integrated systems was really nothing more than a collection of fragile bubbles raised on stilts above a wasteland of ice colder than the inner circle of Hell and pocked everywhere with ancient craters.

Maybe those fuckers up there, staring at him like a bunch of affronted lemurs, had heard about the assassin—maybe they were waiting for something to happen. You could definitely sell tickets for that kind of show to the tweaks; they'd pay any price to see one of their so-called oppressors reamed from throat to balls. Faustino toyed with the notion of identifying them with his phone and calling in a squad of troopers and giving them the roughest day of their lives—and he would have done it, too, except he had only a few hours to fix things with Todd Krough, pick up the first installment of the fee and get aboard the shuttle, dot the *i*'s and cross the *t*'s of the sweet deal that meant early retirement, purchase of land to replace the estate his profligate father had lost, and restoration of his family's honor.

A stick-thin young man with a powder-white complexion, in a plain black jumper and tights patterned with black and white diamonds, was hanging nonchalantly on the other side of the street's skein of red and yellow cords, and taking a good long look at him. After a moment, Faustino realized that he knew the tweak—he was one of Todd Krough's junior hoods, Joly or Josif or some other dumb anglo name—and gave him a cool nod of recognition.

The boy gangster looked left and right and up and down, and swung neatly across the cordway onto the café's net platform. Faustino drained his beaker of coffee, tossed it in the general direction of the disposal, and said, "Where's your boss, compañero?"

The boy said, "Todd doesn't like public places. Todd told me to take you to him."

His black eyes were set close together above the sharp blade of his nose; he must have practiced for hours in front of the mirror to perfect that flat, fuck-you stare. He was twice Faustino's height, but so thin that in Earth's gravity he would have collapsed like a bundle of twigs. Faustino could have snapped one of his arms between thumb and forefinger.

"Suppose I want to talk to him here, out in the open with God as our witness. What would Todd do about that?"

The boy shrugged. "Todd knows that you must leave soon. Todd knows you have no time to play games. Todd also told me to tell you that you are late, and Todd isn't happy about that. Todd wants you to know he's pissed."

"Todd needs to learn patience," Faustino said, thinking that this kid had big balls to try and give him such grief. He was about to elaborate on this theme, to explain to the boy exactly where he stood in the scheme of things, when someone called his name.

Faustino turned—too quickly and with too much force. He almost tipped out of the sling chair and had to grab the boy's shoulder to steady himself. The boy's collar bone made a sharp edge under the slick material of his jumper.

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"Oh no," Faustino said.

Coming down the cordway, smooth and fast as any native, was Sri Hong-Owen's right-hand man, Yamil Chou. He saw Faustino staring at him, smiled, and came on.

"Who the fuck is that?" the boy said.

"It isn't anything to do with you," Faustino said. "It shouldn't be anything to do with me, either. Stay frosty, friend. Let me deal with it."

But the boy reached for something under his jumper as Yamil Chou swung down to the net platform, and Yamil Chou, quick as a striking snake, caught the boy's thin wrist and broke it with a crunching snap. Faustino winced; the boy turned even paler but somehow managed not to cry out. He had big balls, all right.

Yamil Chou looked Faustino up and down, perfectly balanced on the swaying net, neat as a cat in white tunic jumper and white tights, his startling green eyes radiating a weird serenity. It was impossible to read from his face or his body language his intentions or his state of mind. Perhaps he didn't *have* a state of mind. Perhaps he was some kind of tweak, too: a vat-grown zombie. It was entirely possible. After all, what was the point of being a gene wizard if you couldn't make your servants exactly the way you wanted them? Perhaps Yamil Chou, with his porcelain perfect skin, his small still face and those extraordinary eyes, was what an assassin looked like before assuming a temporary human disguise.

"Lieutenant-General Hong-Owen is very anxious to show you what she has found," he told Faustino. He was still holding on to the gangster's broken wrist, but other than that he seemed to be paying the poor kid no attention whatsoever.

"It will have to wait," Faustino said, trying to kindle some anger from the ashes of his utter dismay. How the fuck had this creature found him, down in the bowels of the city? Did he have access to the surveillance system? Or had that moron Gabriel Blanca somehow overridden the spycam AI, traced him, and blabbed?

"This is of extreme importance," Yamil Chou said.

"So is my business," Faustino said. "You can let go of the kid, by the way. He isn't going to cause any trouble."

The boy said, "Just tell me who the *fuck*—"

And then he was tumbling away head over heels, arms and legs flailing. He slammed into the roof of a workshop a dozen meters below the cordway, slid down its tight curve, howling when his broken wrist knocked against a resin spur, and managed to catch hold of a power cable with a prehensile foot. He twisted upside-down like a bat, his right hand going for his weapon and finding it not there—it was magically in Yamil Chou's hand, although the man had barely moved, was still poised like a dancer on the net platform, as if he was able to violate the law of action/reaction everyone quickly learnt about in Mimas's microgravity. He looked at the thing he'd taken from the boy, a fat tube of clear plastic with indented fingergrips at one end, then tossed it into the maw of the café's disposal.

"You go tell your boss I'm busy," Faustino told Yamil Chou loudly, for the benefit of the boy. "Anything she wants to disclose to the security force should go directly to my deputy."

"You must come with me," Yamil Chou said.

"The fuck I will, you freak," Faustino said, and reached for his pistol and tried to pull back when Yamil Chou grasped his wrist. The freak's long,

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neatly manicured fingers were as strong as steel. His calm green eyes were scant centimeters from Faustino's.

"Colonel Faustino Malarte," Yamil Chou said formally, "Lieutenant General Sri Hong-Owen requests that you attend her at once. It is a matter of the gravest importance, concerning the fugitive war criminal known as Avernus. I must tell you now that I have been given the authority to carry out my duty in any way I see fit."

Yamil Chou let go of Faustino's wrist and slapped his cheek, all in one smooth quick motion. Something stuck just below Faustino's eye, and even as he reached up to pull it off his muscles went as weak as water. He saw café, cordway and flowering thickets revolve around each other as Yamil Chou towed him away; he heard, small as the squeak of an ant, the boy gangster shouting that Todd would kill him for this. Then something like sleep claimed him.

Faustino was falling feet first past an endless cliff, with a demon riding his chest and a crackling jellyfish pressed against his nose and mouth. The assassin! He was being murdered! He tried to grab his pistol, but his arms were bound, the demon rode him expertly, and the movement was too much for his gorge. His stomach clenched and he spewed a hot jet of bitter brown fluid. Tears swelled in his eyes; in the vestigial gravity they did not break but clung to his lashes like watery goggles. A second spasm brought up a weaker surge of coffee and chyme, and he coughed and spat and snorted until he could get his breath.

"Hold still," the demon said. It was Yamil Chou. He deftly wiped Faustino's mouth and eyes with a tissue, flicked the tissue into the jellyfish, which somehow had become a plastic bag, and pinched the neck of the bag shut.

"What did you do to me?"

Faustino was strapped to an acceleration couch. His throat was raw, and his headache had returned. Sunlight splintered in his eyes. Beyond his boots, beyond a semireflective curve of clear diamond, a vast cliff was rushing past, its pale glare printed with inky crescents and clefts. Or no, Faustino realized, his stomach floating toward the top of his throat as his perspective swung through ninety degrees, it was not a cliff at all, but the surface of Mimas. This close little hemisphere of air was the cabin of a gig falling in a precise trajectory across the pockmarked face of the icy moon.

Yamil Chou unsnapped the couch's straps. "It was necessary to give you a small dose of tranquilizer, Colonel. I regret the side-effects of the counteragent."

Those cold green eyes gave nothing away. Faustino realized now that their color reminded him of the winter swells of the Atlantic breaking on the long, long beach at the northern boundary of his family's estate. His nostrils stung and he sneezed; disgustingly, a little spray of vomit shot from his nose.

Faustino swallowed his nausea, gathered what was left of his dignity, and said, "You are going to have a lot to answer for, my friend."

Yamil Chou blotted at the widening constellation of opalescent globules with a tissue. "Lieutenant General Hong Owen requested your presence, Colonel. I was instructed to facilitate it."

Faustino's fingers ever-so-casually brushed the flap of his holster. It was empty. Of course it was empty. He had a sudden horrible vision of Yamil Chou towing his snoring self through the cordways of the city. Tweaks hang-

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ing everywhere, tweaks laughing at his shame, tweaks *videoing* him, and not one moving to help him. Pictures of his shame all over the city's infoweb.

"Facilitate my presence—is that what you call it? You drugged me, you freak! You kidnapped me!"

"I was instructed to use any means necessary, Colonel. Lieutenant-General Hong-Owen has made an important discovery, and it is necessary that you, as senior officer of Mimas's security force, witness it. I was instructed to bring you to her, and to show you this."

Yamil Chou held a sheet of film in front of Faustino's face.

Faustino said, "What the fuck is this?"

But he knew very well what it was. Greasy globules of panic sweat popped from his armpits and his forehead as he studied the neat rows of black and red numbers. Some data miner had reconstructed every scam and clandestine deal, had even pierced the black ice encryption protecting his very private account on the Bourse. It was all there. The blackbook enterprises, the placement bribes, the fees for expediting licenses: everything.

Yamil Chou gave the film a short, sharp shake. Numbers swarmed to its margin and a little window opened in its center, a spycam view of Faustino in his white uniform with its scrambled egg trim, talking head to head with Todd Krough.

". . . No one will know about it," Faustino heard himself saying, "until the guidance motors fire, and then it will be too late. A nudge at the very end of its trajectory, and it will fertilize your own territory, not the government's. A nudge that will be very reasonably explained by a mistake in the guidance system—a deliberate mistake inserted by a rogue technician who will be executed for sabotage. I have already selected our scapegoat. She had a cousin who was crewing a scow at the beginning of the war. The scow was taken out by an emp mine, and of course her cousin died—"

Yamil Chou shook the film again, and the tinny whisper of Faustino's recorded voice cut off.

"An outrageous fake," Faustino said with trembling defiance. "An evil tissue of lies woven by some story machine."

"We have much more, of course," Yamil Chou told Faustino. "More than enough to incriminate both the senior officer who has agreed to help you, and the man in the traffic control center who has been paid to infect the ring fragment's guidance AI with a virus, to alter its trajectory."

"There is no such virus. I challenge you to ask for the guidance AI to be completely analyzed. Nothing out of the ordinary will be found."

"Of course not, because the virus will be downloaded into the guidance AI tomorrow. That is why Lieutenant-General Sri Hong-Owen wishes to talk with you."

"And I certainly will talk with her. After I have arrested her, and taken her back to Camelot."

Yamil Chou pulled on mesh gloves with a brisk snap. "I suggest that you strap yourself into your couch. We are almost at our destination."

"I will arrest her," Faustino said, his voice loud in the tiny space. "And you, sir, and all of her crew."

But Yamil Chou had turned away from him. He waved his hands through a virtual display, and the ice plain tilted away as the gig spun end for end. Faustino felt weight ghost through him as the gig's motor fired up, and he hastily fumbled with the snaps of the couch's straps. The gig was traveling

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backward as it decelerated, and now its nose was pointed toward Saturn, which hung huge and swollen just above the close, curved horizon.

They must be near Herschel crater and the western edge of the sub-saturnian hemisphere, Faustino thought, which meant that those long dark streaks thrown across the ground weren't shadows at all, but thin films of sooty material flung across ancient craters and fractured plains by the impact of the chunk of carbonaceous-rich ice that had been culled from Saturn's B ring a year ago. And if Sri Hong-Owen had gone to all this trouble to have him brought to Herschel crater, perhaps she really had found something after all.

Sri Hong-Owen had come to Mimas sixty-five days ago, after a survey team had discovered the entrance to a subsurface structure on the outer slope of Herschel crater's rimwall. The entrance had been revealed by quakes caused by the impact of a sooty ring fragment that had been intended to fertilize the ice plain north of Camelot Chasma, and turn it into vacuum organism farmland that could support the growing population of incomers. But instead of blowing into a cloud of fine dark dust a kilometer above the surface, the fragment had smashed down intact, creating a new crater half a kilometer in diameter, spattering debris over a quarter of the little moon's sub-saturnian hemisphere, and causing violent localized quakes and landslides as the rigid ice crust rang like a bell. Two of Camelot's domes had ruptured; more than eighty people had died because they had not been able to grab air masks in time. Luckily, Faustino, his senior officers, and half of the security force had taken the precaution of going into orbit, and had been able to restore order as soon as they had returned to the city.

At first, almost everyone had believed that this disaster had been caused by sabotage—three technicians with questionable security records had been arrested, tried, and executed within an hour of the impact—but a detailed inquiry had discovered that someone had entered a minus instead of a plus into the program that had controlled the explosive charges: they had been set to detonate a kilometer below the surface of Mimas instead of a kilometer above it.

Out of this comprehensive disaster came a single stroke of luck. A landslide revealed the entrance to a tunnel high in an ice cliff at the western edge of Herschel crater, a tunnel that led into the warren of chambers and caves that was the secret laboratory of Avernus. The Three Powers Occupation Force had known that it was hidden somewhere in Herschel, but the gigantic crater was a hundred and thirty kilometers across, about one-third the diameter of Mimas, and whole cities could have been hidden in its jumbled icescapes. When a tourist had disappeared in the area a couple of years ago, a thorough grid search of ten square kilometers of fractured ice around his abandoned rover had failed to turn up so much as a boot print. It was pure chance that a survey team had spotted gases venting from the tunnel, that the very disaster that had given Faustino the idea for the scheme that would restore his family's fortune had also revealed the treasure Sri Hong-Owen so badly craved.

Chance. Fate. A bad cosmic joke.

Never tell anyone your plans, Faustino's mother liked to say, because God will hear about them.

The gig was dropping toward a tall ice cliff that stood knee-deep in great fans of debris. Yamil Chou fluttered his gloved fingers, as if conducting a

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delicate minuet. Attitude jets thumped. The gig slewed sideways, dropping between two huge folds of ice toward silver-grey domes that clung to a sheer wall—they reminded Faustino of the swallows' nests under the eaves of the red-tiled roof of the villa his family had rented each year in the little Portuguese village, in the happy summers before his father had lost everything. Two puffs of white vapor briefly flowered beneath the domes and something explosively unfurled: a net of smart fullerene mesh. The gig yawed close to the ice wall, dropped. The net folded around it.

Sri Hong-Owen was the best gene wizard on Earth; it was said that in all the solar system she was second only to Avernus. She had designed most of the bioweapons deployed by the Three Powers Alliance; she was a billionaire several times over (she was rumored to have bought outright the co-orbital satellites Janus and Epimetheus); she was utterly obsessed with the woman she believed to be her sworn enemy.

Faustino had met Sri Hong-Owen just once before, when she had first arrived on Camelot. She was a short, slender woman with a large, vivid presence, punctilious, brusque, and caring not at all for social niceties. Her head was shaven, she wore plain coveralls and was barefoot—her toes were as long and flexible as fingers, the result of a famous self-experiment in postnatal homeobox morphogensis. Her eyes, their pupils capped with silvery datalenses, raked Faustino from head to toe, and she told him that she was going to throw a security zone with a radius of fifty kilometers around what she called the nest, that all the supplies she required would be routed from Dione and sent directly to her research station unopened and untampered, that he, Colonel Faustino Malarte, could best help her by staying out of her way. Faustino had been entirely agreeable. For one thing, he had no choice—she out-ranked him, and could have bought and sold his soul with her spare change. For another, he wanted never to see the condescending, ice-cold witch again.

But now here he was, being hustled by the witch's chief of staff down the bore of a quilted corridor that had snaked out like a tongue to kiss the hatch of the gig. They passed through a series of pressure doors to a narrow walkway that twisted between little cubicles and cells and carousels where, in a hum of self-absorbed activity, techs were busy at whatever techs did, to a small, spherical room lined entirely with white fur where Sri Hong-Owen and her young son, Alder, lounged at their ease like a pair of haughty cats.

The gene wizard favored Faustino with a bright smile. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Yamil, fetch our guest tea."

Faustino felt prickly fur liquidly sway beneath him, and was struck by a weak surge of nausea. Was he going to throw up again? No, thank Christ.

The woman and the boy were watching him with barely concealed amusement. Both wore blood-red skinthins, and their shaven scalps gleamed in chilly light shed by a single suspensor lamp. Both had the same intense, serious gaze, the same bright blue eyes with silver points instead of pupils, the same knowing smile crimping the corners of their bloodless lips. Faustino noticed that Sri Hong-Owen was stroking her son's calf with one of her long-toed feet, and remembered the rumor that she had illegally cloned herself and switched the embryo's sex; certainly, no one knew who the father of her son had been, or who was the father of the embryo she was currently incubating in an artificial womb on the Titan station.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "Do you believe in fate, Colonel? Do you believe that

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our destinies are shaped by patterns and forces we cannot see? Or do you think that everything we do is shaped by nothing more than chance and contingency?"

"I was raised as a Catholic, Madam."

"That's a slippery answer, Colonel. But then, you're a slippery man, aren't you? It's certainly been hard, getting hold of you."

"I understand that you have made a discovery," Faustino said. He felt the same mixture of dread and impatience that had settled over him while enduring the mandatory Sunday visit with his great-grandmother in her dim, stuffy suite, its dusty shadows cluttered with two centuries' worth of mementos and the little medical machines that kept her alive.

Sri Hong-Owen studied him for a moment, then said, "What do the citizens of Camelot have to say about Avernus, Colonel?"

Faustino shrugged. "I've never asked them."

"But you know that they think she's alive."

"I suppose so," Faustino said.

"It doesn't mean that she *is* alive," the little boy, Alder, said, his piping treble thickened by scorn.

Sri Hong-Owen ignored her son. "Do your spies keep you informed about the rumors concerning Avernus, Colonel?"

The mention of spies made Faustino uneasy. He said stiffly, "I take little notice of rumors, Madam. I prefer facts."

"The citizens of Camelot think she is alive—that's a fact. They think she has a secret laboratory. Not this one, which she has obviously abandoned, but one hidden somewhere far from here. In the rings, or in an asteroid whose orbit crosses that of Saturn, or even further out. On Charon, or in one of the Kuiper Belt objects, or even in a comet. There's even a story that she and her retinue lie sleeping in the heart of a comet outward bound from the sun, that when she returns, in a hundred or a thousand years, she will begin a war that will free the colonies of the Outer System. Romantic nonsense of course, but I believe that it has been elaborated around a kernel of truth."

"You came here to look for her, Madam. Have you found her?"

"Of course not. She is hiding somewhere, but not here." Sri Hong-Owen's gaze suddenly focused on something behind Faustino, and she said, "Thank you, Yamil."

The chief of staff had silently reappeared. With a modest flourish he presented to Faustino a beaker soothingly warm to the touch. The air of the fur-lined tent was so cold that everyone's breath was visible; Faustino was uncomfortably aware the whole structure was pinned to an ice cliff, with nothing but vacuum beyond its thin skin, was aware too of the soft sounds of the techs working in their cells all around, of an oppressive sense of watchful thought. It was if, somehow, he had become trapped inside Sri Hong-Owen's skull.

"The tea will help you," Sri Hong-Owen said. "It is a formulation of mine."

Faustino took a polite sip, and found that the tea *was* good: hot, green, and sharpened with ginger.

"When you see what I have found, you will understand why I took such extraordinary measures to bring you here, Colonel Malarte," Sri Hong-Owen said.

"I am not sure whether I should congratulate you or arrest you, Madam. You may have made an important discovery, but that is no justification for kidnapping the head of Camelot's security force."

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"You would not come voluntarily, Colonel. You were too busy with that silly little ruffian. . . ."

Sri Hong-Owen snapped her fingers impatiently, and Yamil Chou said, "Todd Krough, Madam."

"That's the man. Please, Colonel, don't try to deny it. You know that I know all about your little scheme, but let me assure you that I did not bring you here to condemn you. Quite the contrary."

Faustino said, "Who gave you permission to pry into my business affairs?"

"I am operating within the parameters of our agreement, Colonel."

"I remember no such agreement, Madam."

"Of course you do. You waived all rights to oversee my investigation, and gave me carte blanche to proceed as I saw fit."

"Your investigation into this facility, yes—"

"The scope of my investigation includes all the activities of the war criminal, Avernus," Sri Hong-Owen said. "That includes assessing rumors, stories, gossip, and hearsay circulating within the local population. As part of that investigation, I turned up enough evidence of corruption to damn you forever."

Her cold, bright gaze pierced him through. The boy, Alder, was staring at him too.

"However," Sri Hong-Owen said, "I am not at all interested in your petty schemes, except that one of them makes you useful to me."

Faustino gave her his best smile. It was obvious that she needed something from him. He was acutely aware that the clock was ticking, but there was still enough time to make a deal with her, and to get back to Camelot and catch the shuttle to Dione. It was possible that he was not doomed after all.

He said, "I am in your hands, Madam. What do you want of me?"

"Even I was beginning to believe that Avernus had stripped everything out of her nest," Sri Hong-Owen told Faustino. "But just as I was about to abandon the search, I found what she had been forced to leave behind."

"She wanted you to find it," Alder said, and told Faustino, "You'll have to forgive my mother. Until now, she's been unable to brag about her discovery."

The boy sat beside Sri Hong-Owen, facing Faustino and Yamil Chou. They were all cased in pressure suits and strapped into a cart that was traveling down a rack-and-pinion track laid down a narrow, steeply sloping shaft driven through four kilometers of ice to the bottom of Avernus's secret facility. Ripples and flaws within the opalescent walls of the shaft glowed in the cart's headlights like seams of semi-precious stones, slipping past at a steady twenty kilometers per hour. Faustino thought that it was like sliding down the throat of a giant.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "If she did mean me to find it, she set me no easy task. There are hundreds of chambers and at least a thousand kilometers of corridors and shafts. It is a labyrinth more complicated than any the pharaohs built to memorialize their deaths." (Alder whispered, "He won't know about *them*." His mother ignored him.) "But this is no monument; Avernus simply turned on dozens of mining machines and left them running. There are mazes in three dimensions and chambers as big as cathedrals. There is a shaft that runs for more than eighty kilometers to a system of deep fractures under the floor of Herschel crater; that's where she vented

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water vapor from the mining. Most of the chambers are empty, but we had to map everything using deep radar and then explore it all with drones before we could come in ourselves. The whole place epitomizes the woman's approach to her work—no design, no plan, just blind faith that chance will throw up something useful. A horribly wasteful fumbling, like trying to build a machine by repeatedly throwing its components into the air. Given an infinite amount of time, you can of course derive every possible structure by chance, but it's hardly a useful strategy."

"Perhaps you could give me an idea of what you have found, Madam," Faustino said. Pinched in the shell of the badly fitting p-suit, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder and thigh-to-thigh beside Yamil Chou, he felt horribly cramped and claustrophobic. He hated p-suits; this was only the fourth time he'd worn one since he had taken up his post. It chafed his knees and elbows and crotch, and smelt strongly and disagreeably of someone else's stale sweat.

"Don't worry, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said, "I don't want you to miss your shuttle. As for what I found, I think you already know something about it."

"If you were doing your duty by spying on me, Madam," Faustino said, "then you cannot blame me for doing mine."

"Of course not. But you should know that those reports were mostly lies. I had to tell the Three Powers Occupation Force something, you see, or they would have sent someone to investigate."

"This is all a waste of time," Alder said. "He won't understand a thing."

Faustino smiled at the precocious monster. "I can assure you, young man, that I will try very hard to understand what your mother has discovered."

"Even his lies are feeble," the boy said contemptuously, "and lying is what he does best."

Faustino allowed himself a warm little fantasy—the brat's helmet smashed open, his silent gaping scream as vacuum ripped breath and bloody froth from his lungs—and was startled when Yamil Chou laid a gloved hand on the crook of his elbow.

"Yamil is very good at what he does," Alder said, with a nasty smirk.

Faustino belatedly worked out the trick; it was just what he would have done, in the circumstances. "My suit is monitoring me," he said, "and your man is snooping on the readouts."

"You're cleverer than you look," the boy said grudgingly, "even if you're not as clever as you think you are."

"Hush," Sri Hong-Owen told her son. "We must use what we can."

"We would have done better with the gangster," Alder said.

"Colonel Faustino not only has access to the general in charge of traffic control," Sri Hong-Owen said serenely, "he also has what the general craves."

Faustino was beginning to understand what she wanted from him. He said, "We need each other, it seems."

"For the moment," Sri Hong-Owen said.

The shaft's steep slope flattened out. The cart slowed, glided dreamily through a tunnel supported by hoops of adamantine fullerene into a chamber lined with soft quilting that glowed a sickly yellow-green, and stopped with eerie precision by an oval hatch.

Yamil Chou kept his pincer-like grip on Faustino's elbow as they cycled through the double airlock. "Don't compromise your suit's integrity,

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Colonel," the chief of staff said. "The airlock is for the protection of what's inside, not to keep in an atmosphere."

The airlock led into a rectangular, low-roofed, dimly lit bunker. Half-dismantled machines squatted like dead toads on the rubbery floor, and a spherical tent of clear plastic furnished with sling chairs, lockers, and a foodmaker stood in their midst like the nucleus of a cell.

Sri Hong-Owen and Alder, their blood-red p-suits vivid in the crepuscular light, glided through the gloomy junkyard to a wide window at the far side. Yamil Chou forced Faustino to follow. The window was set in the waist of a vast, spherical chamber lit by a pale point source hung at the apex of its icy ceiling. Muscular humps of ice swept down in smooth arcs toward a flattened floor, streaked with frozen eddies and swirls the color of old, clotted blood. Things the shiny black of beetles' wings grew where the ice was darkest: dense copses of half-melted candles; phalanxes of tooth-like spikes; heaps of tangled wires; wide meadows of brittle hairs; gardens of paper-thin sheets and curled scrolls like the bits of spun sugar the estate's pastry cook had sometimes slipped to the young, sweet-toothed Faustino. Many of the meadows and gardens had sickly white margins studded with what looked like giant toadstools, and a large copse half a kilometer downslope was clearly dying from the inside out, its lumpy spires crumbling into grey ash.

"Surely these are nothing more than vacuum organisms," Faustino said, unable to hide his disappointment.

He had been expecting a clone farm of exotically tweaked babies, a wonderland full of exotic plants and animals. These growths were little different from the thick black carpets cultivated in the experimental fields south and west of Camelot, on ice fertilized with expensively imported tarry stuff mined from carbonaceous chondrites.

"Of course," Sri Hong-Owen said. "But they are not at all like vacuum organisms grown for CHON food, except that they use light energy to convert primordial hydrocarbons and amino acids to more complex forms. Commercial vacuum organisms have a pseudocellular structure, and share the same DNA code as every organism on Earth, although of course it is written in artificial pyranosylic analogs of the four familiar nucleotide bases. In many ways, they are similar to terrestrial prokaryotes."

"Bacteria," Alder told Faustino. "Microbes. Bugs."

His mother did not seem to notice this interruption. She said liltingly, as if wrapping herself in a comfortable story, "These, though, are far more primitive. If commercial vacuum organisms are synthetic analogs of prokaryotes, these are analogs of the ancestors of prokaryotes. They have no pseudocellular structure, and they have no genome. They are not generated by the systematic execution of a centralized set of encoded instructions, but are networks of self-catalyzing metabolic cycles derived from the interactions of pseudoproteinaceous polymers."

Alder said, "He won't have understood a single word."

Faustino, eager to prove the brat wrong, said, "These things are not alive. They are like carpets or suit-liners."

The boy's high-pitched giggle filled Faustino's helmet.

Sri Hong-Owen laid her gloved hand on the shoulder of her son's p-suit and said, "Be quiet, Alder. The Colonel is quite right, and you know it."

Alder shrugged off her grip, and told Faustino, "My mother believes that, without the ability to internally encode information essential to their reproduction, these are no more than machines. I disagree. I believe that they

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are alive. They use energy to transform simple compounds to complex compounds; they reproduce; they even exchange information among themselves, although that information is entirely analog in form. We are accustomed to thinking of information as being encoded in the written word, in the binary code at the base of all computer languages, or in the genome, written in the four-letter alphabet of DNA and RNA. Out there—" Alder made an oddly grand gesture at the icescape that fell away beyond the wide window— "is a world in which the word is flesh, and flesh is word. There is no distinction between the two—they are one, indivisible. In that world, there can be no subterfuge, no falsehoods or untruths, Colonel. What is, is. Of course, I expect that you find the idea quite alien."

The brat was a monster, all right.

"They are machines, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said. "Self-assembling machines made out of polymers that resemble proteins, but machines nevertheless. However, they respond to changes in their environment by obeying the same self-organizing principles exhibited by biological systems. Like natural proteins, their polymers have funnel-shaped energy landscapes. Like proteins, the functional shapes they assume are reached by bumping down the contours of those funnels until they come to rest at the lowest energy configuration. Avernus did not provide assembly instructions, but she made use of components that obey self-organizing rules. By gaining a complete understanding of those rules, it will be possible to control them."

Alder said, "My mother believes that these organisms can be manipulated to produce predictable states. She believes that it is a kind of puzzle, a challenge to her skill and intelligence. I disagree. Avernus's genius was to select rules that produced organisms lacking any internal description, so that it is impossible to change them in any predictable way, or to predict how they might evolve. She has set up a kind of analog computer that generates unique and unpredictable solutions to a single problem: how to survive and grow."

Sri Hong-Owen said, "You must forgive my son, Colonel. He is young; he is still infected with romanticism. If Avernus was possessed by a kind of genius, it was a horribly self-indulgent genius, obsessed with playing games for the sake of nothing more than play itself. I will prove myself her superior. I will show that by providing this system with the right information to process, it will be possible to force it to produce predictable solutions."

Alder said, "My mother believes in the supremacy of logic and order. She believes that science is our only salvation; that only science can make sense of the world and of ourselves. She believes in control and determinacy. These organisms, and their unique, unrepeatable beauty, are an affront to her. She cannot believe that they are nothing more than a game. She has to believe that they have a purpose, and so she has no choice but to prove herself better than her enemy by trying to control something that by its very nature cannot be controlled. Something that is nothing more than an elaborate hoax, a beautiful joke, a system for cranking out random wonders."

"Sometimes I think I should have made you dumb and compliant," Sri Hong-Owen told her son.

"But then you would have had no one to talk to," Alder said complacently.

They were like squabbling lovers, Faustino thought.

"Oh, don't think you are irreplaceable," Sri Hong-Owen said. "Avernus and I will have many things to talk about, after I have found her. And then there's your new brother, waiting to be born."

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"I know that you'll love him more than me," Alder said, "but I don't care, because I know that I'm the only person in the whole solar system who is your equal."

"Of course you are," Sri Hong-Owen said indulgently, and turned to Faustino. "Despite our differences, Colonel, we both agree that if we want to discover the potential of this experiment, we have to let it grow. Avernus has left behind an uncontrolled experiment that, true to her so-called principles, can only be understood in its entirety."

"Not only that," Alder said, "but it is an experiment that is unrepeatable. These organisms have no internal description, no kernel containing a minimal set of instructions necessary to implement the resynthesis of their complex analog patterns. If they are lost, their past and future will also be lost, irretrievably. For even if it is possible to recreate the identical set of conditions from which they arose—and it is not possible, for they have no internal bootstrapping symbolism—there is no guarantee that the same path would be followed, that the same entities would be produced."

"That's why this experiment cannot be allowed to fail, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said. "I will not let it fail. I will understand it. I will learn how to control it and shape it."

Faustino had understood very little of this, except that these weird growths were of immense value to the gene wizard. He asked cautiously, "How can you control something that does not contain any internal control system? How can anything that does not contain information process information? It seems to me that it is a self-evident contradiction."

"I will provide a demonstration, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said, and asked the air for a view of a set of coordinates.

A two-dimensional virtual window scrolled down in front of them, panning across a bare slope to focus on a silvery box slung between four long, thin, articulated legs.

"Run the sequence," Sri Hong-Owen said.

The robot suddenly jerked forward, stalking stiffly across the ice to a cluster of lumpy spikes that stood in a puddle of sooty ice. It extruded a nozzle that jetted a brief mist, and the spikes' black skins immediately grew a pattern of luminous orange blotches.

"That was a spray of *N*-acetylglucosamine," Sri Hong Owen said. "It is a common lectin, a protein that specifically binds to a sequence of sugar residues. Polymers on the surface of the machine bind to it, and that initiates a sequence that results in the luminescent display."

"Then these things, they are chemical detectors?"

"In the most basic sense, yes," Sri Hong-Owen said. "The polymers do not encode any information, but they are capable of processing information. Each organism consists of a specific set of polymers, and each polymer exists in one of two states, either on or off, determined by a number of limited rules. For instance, the polymer might switch on in the presence of either of two chemical substrates. Or it might require the presences of both substrates."

"Boolean logic," Faustino said, relieved to at last have recognized a thread of argument.

The tutor that had lived in the softly glowing egg-shaped room at the far end of young Faustino's bedroom suite, manifesting as a kindly old man with a shock of white hair and a patient, twinkling expression, had once spent a whole week helping him build a variety of simple computers from

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blocks of virtual light. He had mourned his tutor when they had had to leave the estate; he had been too young to realize that AIs are not people.

"Exactly so," Sri Hong-Owen said. "The reaction you saw was a simple AND sequence—lectin plus binding polymer equals activation of another polymer that produces the luminescence. These machines are Boolean networks, capable of generating orderly dynamics—fixed state cycles. Imagine a machine made of just a hundred polymer components, each capable of being either on or off, and thus generating ten to the power of thirty possible arrays. If every component receives an input from every other component, the system will become chaotic, cycling through a vast number of states at random; it would take a very long time before it returned to its original state. But if each component receives just two inputs, the system will spontaneously generate order—it will cycle between just four of its ten to the power of thirty possible states. Constrained by spontaneous, self-organizing dynamical order, these polymer machines generate fixed state cycles that are very similar to chunks of our own metabolic processes. Since these cycles are capable of processing information, it is possible to generate predictable results by supplying them with the right information."

Faustino said, "It's very impressive."

Although he still could not imagine how they could be of any use at all, there was a strange beauty, a pleasing asymmetry, to the copses and forests and meadows of spikes and spires, scrolls and sheets, that were scattered across the vast bowl of the landscape. It reminded him of the neatly nested mechanism of the ancient watch his father had worn on his wrist, an heirloom centuries old. Once, his father had pried open the back of the watch to show his son the sets of cogs and springs and tiny balances working away at different cycles that somehow meshed to drive the hands around the face at exactly one second per second. Gone now, like everything else his father had owned.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "As a first step, I have been testing their reaction to a wide range of chemical messengers, but they are much more than chemical detectors. I have discovered that when two different forms grow together, their pseudometabolic hypercycles interact and produce *new* machines. It is quite possible that interactions between second generation machines could produce a third generation, and so on. The diversity of the system is constrained only by its size."

Faustino said, "So if this chamber was bigger, there would be many more different things growing in it?"

"It's a very good joke," Alder said. "The only way to discover what this system is capable of is to provide it with an arena where it can fully express itself. And so Avernus mocks you, Mother, and you do not see it."

"I will prove my son wrong," Sri Hong-Owen said. "I will derive solutions that will define the entire information space of these machines. However, there is an immediate problem that must be addressed."

She spoke to the air again. The view in the virtual window rotated away from the robot and the clump of waxy spires and rushed forward, swooping down a long, icy slope and coming to rest above a black, three-legged footstool that squatted at the ragged, bleached margin of a meadow of unraveled black springs.

"I call this a triffid," Sri Hong-Owen said. "They are motile scavengers, generated by any organism that begins to run out of carbonaceous material. Their legs are woven from strands of piezoelectric proteins that bend when

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a polarized current is applied, and lengthen or shorten depending upon the voltage applied. They feed on material that is no longer active, and there are more and more of them, because this ecosystem is slowly starving to death, and I cannot obtain carbonaceous material through the usual channels."

She told the air to switch off the screen, and turned to face Faustino; her son stared up at him with the same unnervingly steady and direct gaze. She said, "Now I think you can guess what I want from you, Colonel Malarte."

When they met the gig at the landing field, Todd Krough's two men were not at all happy to see that Faustino was accompanied by Sri Hong-Owen's chief of staff. They bundled Yamil Chou and Faustino into an empty office, took away Faustino's pistol (which had been returned to him without its clip), and insisted that Yamil Chou strip. While one man ran a spin resonance loop over the chief of staff's compact body, the other examined the seams of his white jumper and turned his tights inside out as gingerly as a novice conjuror attempting a new trick.

Yamil Chou submitted to their attention with the equitable air of someone being measured for a p-suit. A tremendous scar, thickly ridged and puckered, slashed the well-defined slabs of muscle that banded his belly. When he saw Faustino looking at it, he said, "I keep it to remind me of the one time I made a mistake."

"Get dressed and keep your mouth shut," the older of the two men said, and told Faustino, "Todd wants you to know that he is very upset with you, Colonel."

"He'll like what I have to tell him," Faustino said.

He was eager to tell his story and close the deal he had made with Sri Hong-Owen. She would get her ice garden; he would get his estate. He had fantasized about it on the trip back, planning and planting its verdant acres, building a rambling stone house with cool, secret courtyards and broad sunny terraces, a dining hall hung with old masters, even—why not?—a wing for his as yet unborn children.

He clapped his hands and beamed at the two gangsters. "Are we done here? Then why are we waiting? Let's go!"

Todd Krough had made his fortune by organizing civilian labor at the Camelot spaceport after the war. Traffic was controlled by the Three Powers Occupation Force; he ran everything else. Faustino, Chou, and Krough's two men rode a capsule car five kilometers north. Camelot's cluster of spheres dropped below the abrupt, curved horizon; the spaceport's platforms and towers rose ahead like a castle from a fantasy serial. The four men swung across the mostly empty concourse of the terminal and crowded into a private elevator that shot half a kilometer up the side of an improbably slender tower to the diamond bubble where the gangster was waiting, with all his empire spread below.

The burly woman planted solidly behind Todd Krough's sling chair casually slipped her hand inside a slit in her long jumper as Faustino and Yamil Chou were brought in; the young man beside her, a slithery swath of smartplasm wrapped around his wrist, scowled and told his boss, "This is the one."

"First you have trouble making your appointments," Todd Krough said to Faustino. "Now you turn up with the man who hurt Joly. I am beginning to feel deeply insulted, Colonel."

"There's been a change of plan," Faustino said. "Something so fantastic

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that if I had not been taken to see it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it."

"Something to do with the famous gene wizard, Sri Hong Owen?" Todd Krough steepled his long pale fingers in front of his smile. Even for a tweak he was tall and pale and skeletally thin, his skinniness accentuated by a black vinyl vest that showed every one of his ribs and left his arms bare. He swung idly to and fro in his sling chair; of the half dozen people in the glittering bubble, only he and Yamil Chou seemed entirely at ease. He said, "Don't look so surprised, Colonel. After all, your friend works for Dr. Hong-Owen. She found something, didn't she? Something to do with Avernus."

Yamil Chou inclined his head very slightly and said, "Your intelligence is quite as good as Colonel Malarte claimed, Mr. Krough. I am pleased, because I am sure now that you will understand the value of what I can offer."

"I do not think so," Todd Krough said.

Yamil Chou was good; Yamil Chou was fast. He managed to disarm and kill the man nearest to him before a laser burst punched through his heart. Wisps of smoke trickled from the hole burnt in the back of his white jumper as he sank to the floor.

"A robot sentry," Todd Krough said calmly, after the bodies had been towed away. "I am a people person, Colonel, but sometimes it is good to put your trust in machines."

"You've made a horrible mistake," Faustino said. His dismay was so profoundly abyssmal that it had entirely swallowed his foolish, eager happiness, his land, his house, his unborn family. He was sweating into his uniform, but his mouth was so dry it hurt to speak. "You don't even know how this deal—"

Todd Krough wagged a bony finger. "*We* had a deal, Colonel, before your head was so badly turned by Dr. Hong-Owen. You come with me. It is my turn to show you something."

Colonel Faustino Malarte, who knew now that Todd Krough wanted him dead, discovered that he was braver than he thought. He did not plead for his life, or try to run. He simply tried to convince the gangster that what Sri Hong-Owen had offered him was worth far more than merely controlling land fertilized by diversion of the ring fragment.

Krough listened with abstracted politeness as they rode the elevator down into the bowels of the spaceport, where two men were waiting with a cart whose wide, squashy wheels made a ripping noise as it drove through a maze of quilted corridors.

"I know all about it," the gangster said, when Faustino had at last run out of things to say.

"With respect, I don't think—"

"I know all about it, Colonel," Todd Krough said firmly. "I located one of Avernus's technicians after the facility was abandoned, and after only a little effort on the part of my men he became quite loquacious. It is nothing but a dream, a silly fancy."

"It's no dream, man," Faustino said. "It's real. When we divert the ring fragment to Herschel crater, it will be able to spread out and fully express itself and produce such wonders—"

"How did Dr. Hong-Owen persuade you, Colonel? She knows about our joint venture, of course, but I cannot help but think that she must also know about your other little schemes. Is that why you betrayed me?"

"Listen to me," Faustino said. "Listen. These vacuum organisms are *dy-*

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ing. Dr. Hong-Owen is desperate to save them, and she can't order up her own ring fragment because she's kept the whole thing from the Three Powers Alliance. If we divert the ring fragment to Herschel crater, she can release Avernus's vacuum organisms and let them grow, and claim it was a result of the accident. I've told you how much she will pay us for that. It's far more than you can earn from selling off your land."

"Using the ring fragment to fertilize land I happen to own, and selling squatter licenses to incomers, that is only the beginning. I also control the rail line that crosses the territory. Then there is all the new construction work, the power and air plants . . . your trouble, Colonel, is that you have always thought only of short term gain."

"Then let's talk long term," Faustino said. "When Herschel crater is fertilized, Dr. Hong-Owen will allow the vacuum organisms she's discovered to grow and spread and change. They'll generate hundreds of new forms. Thousands. Some of them will certainly be valuable. They will be able to do things we can't even imagine, man, amazing and wonderful things. I've seen it myself. You have to believe me."

But Todd Krough shook his head, and Faustino knew then that the potential of Avernus's vacuum organisms was fated to be as unrealized as his dream of regaining his family fortune.

"My business is not in promises but in certainty," the gangster said. "Avernus was a great woman, but she was also an idealist. She hid away from the world and played games that meant nothing to anyone but herself. I had thought, Colonel, that you knew as well as I that the Outer System is no longer any place for dreamers or tinkerers. It is poised on the brink of a vast expansion in population. The incomers will need land and food and power and transportation. There's a lot of money to be made from supplying those things. A good deal more in the long term than whatever Dr. Hong-Owen has offered you."

The cart stopped outside an airlock hatch.

Faustino said, "It's not just the money. She knows all about us."

"Of course she does. However, I do not think that she will denounce us to the Three Powers Occupation Force, because that would mean that her own little secret would be made public too. And even if she does denounce me, I have the very best lawyers. They'll tie her up in the courts until I have made enough money to *buy* the courts. Forget her, Colonel, because it is my turn to show you something. I think you will find it very interesting. You don't want to come? Dieter and Piers can help you, although it would not be very dignified."

Faustino said, "I can walk."

"And run too, I hope. That's important. Do you remember the way here? That's important too."

"Don't do this. She's a dangerous enemy. Help me to help her. I'll even give you a share of my half of the fee. I understand what you mean about the long term, really I do, and I don't want you to lose out. Take as much as you want."

"Please, Colonel. Don't spoil my surprise by begging for your life. Face what I want to show you like a man."

The little airlock opened onto a big storage space that was mostly empty and mostly dark. A plastic net was strung tautly from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. As Faustino ducked through the inner hatch someone in the darkness beyond the net howled and ran straight at it and clung there, trying to rip through the dense mesh with nails and teeth.

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It was the assassin. He was naked. Foam flew from his mouth as he worried at the mesh; blood flew from his broken fingernails. Behind him, a man-sized bundle lay on the floor.

Faustino forgot all about Sri Hong-Owen and her cave of marvels. Shock purged him clean.

"I think he is in love," Todd Krough said, and linked his arm with Faustino's and dragged him toward the net. "He wants so much to be with you, Colonel. It is as touching and tragic as any unfulfilled romance."

"You told me that you had killed him."

"I told you that I had disposed of your problem. This is where I disposed him to, after he took apart the sacrificial lamb. Did you ever wonder, Colonel, who set him after you?"

"Of course I did. But it didn't seem important."

"I must admit that I began to have serious doubts about you, Colonel, when you turned the whole thing over to me. I realized then that you were not only a foolish man, but you were lazy as well, and in my opinion that is generally a fatal combination. Well, once your little problem had been put into my hands, I dealt with it as I saw fit. We brought the guilty party here, made him put on your clothes, and gave him to your friend there. What a pity," Todd Krough said dryly, "you couldn't be here. I think you would have enjoyed it."

Lights went up behind the net, starkly illuminating the body. It lay on its back in a pool of its own blood. The assassin had clawed or bitten off most of its face, but Faustino recognized the lanky frame and black, curly hair of his deputy, Gabriel Blanca.

"It was a clever ploy," Todd Krough said. "If the assassin had forced you to stay in your house, our deal would have been ruined. And if you had dared to venture out to try and see me, you would have been killed, with the same result."

"Why—"

"Your deputy was an honorable man, and he was trying to protect his honor. He knew that if your part in our deal was ever discovered, all of your staff would have been purged with you, and so he took steps to try and sabotage the deal. What a pity he underestimated my resourcefulness."

"Gabriel always was short on imagination."

"I don't think you should get any closer, Colonel. You wouldn't like to get any of your friend's spittle or blood on your skin. It contains a poison that's very specifically tailored to your metabolic quirks. And that would spoil the fun—wouldn't it, my dear?"

Todd Krough had addressed his last remark to someone in a corner of the big room. The woman. She stood still and straight on the balls of her bare feet, in a plain black jumper and black tights. The left side of her face was swollen and bruised from the little game she and Faustino had played last night.

"I don't think you two need any introduction," Todd Krough said. His smile stretched his pale skin over his prominent cheekbones, reminding Faustino of the woman's latest drawing.

The woman held up a little spray canister. "I have a new game," she told Faustino. Her voice was strained, the words forced from her by the loyalty virus. "I'm told that this will dissolve the material of the net—"

Faustino shrugged off Todd Krough's grip and threw himself at her, but she twitched aside and he bounced from the wall and tangled in the net. As

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the assassin clambered toward him like a hungry spider, two of Todd Krough's men came forward and dragged Faustino away.

"I do believe that the Colonel understands the rules of the game," Todd Krough told the woman dryly.

Caught between the two men, Faustino said, "You can't do this."

The woman took a deep, shuddering breath and said, "That's what I want to find out."

"She can't do it," Faustino told Todd Krough. "The loyalty virus—"

"She can't kill you directly," the gangster said, "but I wonder what will happen if she tries to kill you indirectly."

Faustino already knew the answer. The loyalty virus had forced her to confess about the poison, but she'd told Faustino *after* she'd added it to his wine. He tried to get free, but the two men held him tightly, their bare, prehensile feet hooked through loops in the floor.

"You still need me," Faustino told Todd Krough. "I have the chestplate. Let me go now, and I swear I'll deliver it. Listen to me, man. I'll even waive the fee."

"There's something else I want to show you," Todd Krough said.

A man glided forward, cradling something wrapped in a length of white cloth. Todd Krough snapped his fingers; the man pulled the cloth away; Faustino's blood thumped solidly in his head. It was the chestplate. It was the third in Munk's famous series, *Seven Views of Saturn's Rings*.

"It isn't the real thing," Todd Krough said. "That's still in your safe, and even I couldn't get access to that. But it's a wonderful job, don't you think?"

A checkered carpet of yellow and blood-red vacuum organisms stretched across a flat plain. The half dozen p-suited figures were too busy with their emblematic tasks to look at the giant planet rising beyond the close horizon, the silver hoop of its rings tilted into the black sky.

"He'll know it's a fake in an instant," Faustino said.

"It was painted in Munk's very studio," Todd Krough said, "using his tools and his paints. Did you know that your lady friend was an apprentice of his? She could have told you so much about what you stole from the man you murdered—yes, I know about the truth behind the 'amusing story' of your acquisition."

Faustino tried to spit at the woman, but his mouth was too dry. "You bitch," he said.

"You know nothing about this place," the woman said. "You know nothing about us. You know nothing about *me*. I was nothing more than a piece of meat to you. Something to use in your filthy games."

"That's not true," Faustino said. "I chose you because I liked you."

"You don't even know my name," the woman said bitterly.

"Of course I do. Iva. Your name is Iva."

"That's *part* of my name, yes, but you don't know the rest. You don't know my family name, even though you had them all executed on trumped up charges of treason."

She was close to the net now. Her thumb was on the button of the slim canister.

"I forbid you," Faustino said. "I order you. You wouldn't dare—"

She did. Then she shuddered, and said in a voice not quite her own, "I'm very sorry, Colonel, but I have made an attempt to kill you."

The assassin had gone very still, holding on to the net with fingers and toes.

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The woman said, her voice high and tight, "I sprayed the net with a solvent—"

Todd Krough put a hand over her mouth, held her close. "Hush now," he said gently, and told Faustino, "I think you had better get going, Colonel. Your friend knows that something has happened, and I think that very soon he'll work out what it is."

The two men shoved Faustino toward the net. He tumbled and rolled, managed to clutch a loop protruding from the soft floor. Barely a meter away, the assassin violently shook the mesh, his wet red mouth twisted wide.

"I'll kill you," Faustino said. "I'll come back with troopers and I'll kill you all."

Todd Krough smiled, and took his hand from the woman's mouth. She said, "I'm sorry that I murdered you," and started to laugh, great whooping bursts of laughter that echoed across the huge room.

The assassin crabbed across the net toward the spot where the plastic mesh was beginning to sag apart.

Faustino, ice in his heart, flung himself at the airlock. Fear made him horribly clumsy, but he managed to get halfway down the corridor before the assassin caught him. O

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ARK

I read in Birdy's Circle
about how the burial business
hurts the earth.
There's no dust to dust
with all that formaldehyde
leaching into the ground
and keeping the microscopic beasties
from their rightful meals.
It's our grisly version
of immortal life I guess:
trapped in a capsule built to withstand
the ravages of decay for several centuries,
drying up and withering
into some papyrus simulacrum
of our former selves.
The dead are like cryogenically
preserved space travelers
hurtling through the cosmos,
pickled in the soil of this
unwieldy generation ship,
as though awaiting a time
when they'll be called back to duty,
revived, rested, and ready.
Nurturing hopes,
under their marble orchards,
that the end of the journey
is before them,
not behind them,
and wanting to look their best
for as long as it takes.

—**Mario Milosevic**

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NATURAL ORDER

Michael Jasper

Michael Jasper, originally from Dyersville, Iowa (home of *Field of Dreams*), now lives in Raleigh, NC, with his wife Elizabeth. He is a Clarion graduate who has written a mainstream novel set in Iowa, a fantasy novel set in past and present Chicago, and co-written a horror novel set in Nebraska. His current project is a near-future SF novel that takes place in various Midwestern locations in America and (for variety) southern Canada. "Natural Order" is his first professional sale.

They picked me up outside Wilmington, North Carolina, just before the rain began, but not before the gale-force winds blew the cigarette out of my mouth. In the dark, I touched the fresh pack of Camels in my coat pocket with relief, feeling more tired than usual. But as long as I had my smokes and my ride, the wind and the rain didn't bother me. That was just my nature. In a matter of speaking.

In the shotgun seat, Mrs. Thompson was bent double, her tiny black hand holding the seat forward at a sharp angle. I pushed my way into the back seat of the mint-green 1972 Monte Carlo. The interior light was dead. I could just make out Missy, a young girl with brownish-blonde dreadlocks, squirming impatiently behind the steering wheel and revving the car's big engine. I'd have to fix the light tomorrow, on our way to the next job.

The front seat dropped into place as I fell toward the back seat, but instead of the cool, welcoming bucket seat I was expecting, I landed on top of something hard and furry and muscular. Sudden barking filled my ears as yellowed teeth flashed in front of my face.

"Down!" Mrs. Thompson shrieked, her voice carrying over the wind and rain. A coiled umbrella shot past me to hover an inch from the muzzle of the long-nosed dog glaring at me. Mrs. Thompson's dark face was a perfect circle of pinched mouth and squinted eyes as she shook the umbrella tip at the dog.

Bob? I wondered, trying to shift my exhausted body off the long-legged dog taking up most of the back seat.

"Put that thing away!" Missy shouted, swerving as the Monte hit water and hydroplaned. "You're gonna put us all in the ditch, old lady."

It wasn't Bob.

The umbrella retreated, and I eased back onto the blanket-covered back seat. The thin, stretched-out looking animal eyed me in the green light of the car's massive dashboard, and the smell of wet dog filled the car. Where the hell did they find another one? After all this time?

Missy punched the accelerator, and the dog and I were both thrown back against the seat. The Monte flew up the onramp leading back onto I-40, just ahead of the storm. I was too tired to push the dog off me, fur in my face. It had been a while since I'd had to share my space in the back of the big old car.

"Meet Walt Whitman," Mrs. Thompson said, trying to relight her pipe with a cheap red lighter. She'd left her window open again while I'd been working, and the rain had drenched most of her right side, including her an-

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cient carved pipe. The two entwined hands that formed the bowl of the pipe were dripping with tobacco-stained water. "He's our new flame."

"Put up your window, Tee," I said, leaning forward to take the wet pipe and lighter from her gnarled fingers. My arms shook as I blew a puff of air onto the pipe, then lit the tobacco again with the cheap lighter. It caught on the first try.

"I could've done *that,* showoff," Mrs. Thompson said, winded from working the crank on the big passenger side window, looking as tired as I felt. She snatched the pipe from my hand and sucked on it greedily.

After pulling out a rawhide chewtoy wedged under my left butt cheek, I reached into my pocket for another cigarette. Next to me, Walt Whitman the dog kicked his legs once with a final growl and curled up into a surprisingly small ball. Only after my eyes had adjusted to the gloom did I see the numbers tattooed in each ear. I lit my Camel.

"At least you got a racer," I said. "Did he win many?"

"He's won his share, down in Florida," Missy said. Her gaze remained glued to the road. Red lights flashed up ahead as we approached the evacuation roadblock. Wind shook the south side of the car, hurling droplets of rain against the windows.

"Twenty-two wins this year alone," Mrs. Thompson said, pulling on her big glasses to peer at a rumpled sheet of paper. "Over eighty in his career, according to the Bosses. He's a flame, all right, our Walt Whitman is. He's . . ."

Her voice dwindled away to a low buzzing for a few seconds. I opened my eyes and exhaled the smoke I'd been holding in. I must've blanked out for a while there, still recovering.

Missy downshifted as she pulled into the median of the interstate to avoid the state troopers and the mess of traffic-snarled cars attempting to leave the coast too late. I tried not to look at the panicked faces inside the cars, lit by the headlights of those behind them. All waiting to escape the storm. Just like us, but powerless to move—to *phase,* if needed—the way we did. Sucking on the cigarette, I slid lower onto the worn-out springs of the back seat. Slowly I pulled my gaze away from those we were leaving behind.

One thing I learned from Oklahoma: if I thought about the people too much, I'd be worthless.

The car bounced hard on its way up the other side of the median, the Monte's ancient shocks working overtime to compensate. My head hit the roof and I glared at Missy, to no avail. Wind slammed the rear of the car as if trying to push us west faster.

With an effort, I stroked the thin fur along the back of the dog next to me, only to evoke a low growl. "Dog's all skin and bones, for shit's sake," I mumbled, just to keep conscious.

"Don't talk bad about the dog," Mrs. Thompson said.

"You could've at least talked to me about this," I said, blowing smoke toward the steering wheel. We had the empty eastbound lanes all to ourselves, with all the signs facing the wrong way. I blinked hard twice, barely able to keep my eyes open. "Consulted me, you know," I said, and passed out next to Walt Whitman.

A day later I was leading Walt Whitman on a jog around a 7-Eleven parking lot south of Davenport, Iowa. At the car, Missy filled the tank while Mrs. Thompson loaded up on Slim Jims and mineral water. A cool breeze, growing stronger, blew in from the northwest across a darkening sky. Two storms

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in as many days. El Niño and La Niña were tag-teaming our asses, and had been for years. We'd driven all night, leaving behind hurricane John on the Atlantic seaboard, pushing hard to make our next appointment. It was Tee's turn to shine, so she was loading up on carbs and lots of saturated fats. I'd forgotten to do that yesterday.

I watched the way the fawn-colored greyhound trotted over the asphalt and concrete of the parking lot. He had his own loping grace, very little wasted movement as he padded around dusty pickups and idling eighteen-wheelers. Only his head bobbed side to side, his big eyes taking in everything around him with what looked like a shit-eating grin pasted onto his narrow snout as he puffed efficiently next to me. I was still beat from last night.

We slowed, but I kept my eyes on him. Just as I was beginning to admire Walt's streamlined figure, he lifted a hind leg and aimed a stream of urine toward my boots.

"Stupid dog," I muttered, stepping back and letting his leash out another foot. He proceeded to piss onto his left front leg, then his right. Great. I couldn't wait to spend the next two days in the back seat with him and his piss-stained paws.

Walt Whitman kept right on smiling up at me and whizzing away until a sharp whistle stopped him in midstream. Missy stood at the pumps, glaring at us while she whistled again. Tee was already buckled into the shotgun seat, tossing greasy wrappers onto the dash as she ate. We took our time walking back to the Monte.

"What *are* you two doing?" Missy said, voice spitting from her young lips like venom. She pulled at her faded Depeche Mode T-shirt. "Watering every fire hydrant in sight? Let's *go*."

"I needed to check his legs," I said. I dipped two paper towels into the water used for cleaning the windshields and rubbed both of Walt Whitman's front legs. "When he's not pissing on them, that is. I want to make sure he's got what it takes."

"Don't trust us?" Tee shouted from inside the Monte Carlo. Her voice was thick with Slim Jims. "Don't think we've been at this long enough to know what we're doing?"

I watched Missy as I threw away the soggy paper towels. "He's no Robert Frost," I said. "I can see that already."

"Would you rather go back to us doing it on our own, without a flame?"

I shuddered before I could stop myself.

Missy turned and slipped into the car, her slim body moving without a trace of awkwardness in her eternally teenaged form. "That's what I thought," she said, starting up the car.

I felt a familiar pressure start to build in my ears as I led the dog around to Tee's side of the car. According to the atlas, it looked like we'd be out in the country, far from too many people. Lucky, I thought, then caught myself. What we did was a necessary service, a balancing act with nature, really. It had nothing to do with luck.

Walt and I slid in behind Tee, who was already beginning to hyperventilate. Her dancing slippers were now hidden by empty bottles of Evian and Slim Jim wrappers. Wind whistled through her partially opened window like the world's angriest flute solo.

Missy's jaw was set in her typical way whenever she got word of the need for her skills. According to the Bosses' message on the radio, we weren't

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needed in LA until Friday. I wanted to remind Missy of that, but I bit my tongue. Ever since we lost Bob, she'd gotten tense about her work. As if she thought it was all her fault.

But now wasn't the time nor the place, I thought, lighting up a cigarette once we were safely away from the noxious fumes of the 7-Eleven. Tee was breathing deeply now, as if she were asleep. I patted Walt on the head, feeling the delicate bones of his skull under my hand. This was Tee's moment, and I wasn't going to let Missy ruin it for her.

The first time I ever saw Mrs. Thompson dance, Robert Frost—Bob for short—had been alive, and I'd broken down into tears at the way she'd moved.

Under a thick black sky, we raced south for another two and a half miles, then parked outside a field far from any farmhouses. The late summer soybean plants rippled and shook like dancers on speed. A tractor roared past on the gravel road, not five feet from the car, the tractor's driver hunched over the wheel with his gaze raised to the clouds massing overhead. I could see his fear, an animal fear. I fought the urge to hurry him out of the way of the approaching devastation, but we were not allowed to interfere in that way. Ever.

Mrs. Thompson stood no more than four and a half feet tall. Her face was usually half-hidden by an oversized pair of tinted blue glasses, yet she always managed to be looking at me over the tops of her spectacles. After touching the tight curls of her white hair, arranging them vainly in the drop-down mirror I'd attached to her visor, Tee turned and gave me a smile.

"Don't cry this time, Zed-baby," she said, handing me her glasses before she stepped out of the car.

She walked to the edge of the field, slipped through the top and middle strands of the barbed wire fence, and began to turn slowly across the field of green. The wind twisted in time to her movements. Every step of her tiny white shoes took her a little bit higher into the air, her shawl opening around her like a parachute, until Tee looked like she was stepping from the top of one soybean plant to the next. And so Mrs. Thompson spun across the field, calling to the wind, and black clouds dipped above her, forming a cone.

In the back seat of the Monte Carlo, scratching behind Walt's ears, I sniffed and wiped my eyes. Again and again. She got me with it every damn time.

Missy let me drive west, while Tee slept. Since we had the time, I'd convinced Missy to let us take the long way to Southern California. Being in Iowa—despite the cushion of Missouri and Kansas between us—still felt much too close to Oklahoma for my tastes. In any case, getting closer to the coast and the air currents I knew best was an added relief. I went through a carton of unfiltered Camels along the way, stubbing out each smoke in our overflowing ashtray and immediately lighting another with the red lighter.

Tee slept most of the way through Iowa, Nebraska, and into South Dakota. She had been taking longer and longer to recover in the past few years. We were all paying the price for not finding a replacement for Robert Frost sooner. Though Tee didn't complain like Missy, I knew the added exertions were taking a toll on her.

Tiring of the road on our way through the Badlands, I stopped the car at a scenic overlook close to Cedar Pass, watching a rain squall form against the

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backdrop of the setting sun. Something about the farmer and his tractor back in Iowa had been sticking in my mind the entire drive. I'd been worried about the man—did he have a family? How would his crops survive? Did he have animals, pets even?

That was when I realized it, looking out at the reddish-tinted land, broken and pockmarked on either side of Highway 240. I was going soft.

Lost in my thoughts, I jumped when I heard a rustle not two feet away. Missy stepped up next to me, having slipped quietly out of the car to avoid waking Tee. I turned to look down at her unsmiling face, then checked on Walt Whitman back in the car. If he got loose out here, we'd never catch him. But he sat obediently in the back seat, peeking through the Monte's tiny rear window and grinning mindlessly at the two of us.

Missy prodded me in the ribs and held out her hand. "Keys," she said.

"With pleasure," I said, and fished the key ring out of my jeans pocket, along with the plastic lighter. I felt for the pack of Camels in my shirt pocket and offered her a smoke. I could smell the green hint of rain all these miles away.

"What's your *problem?*" Missy said, ignoring the cigarette and grabbing the keys. The light of the setting sun softened the lines of her thin face.

I looked away, trying to make like I was studying the hills behind her. The jagged landscape of misformed cliffs and mottled green trees stretched out to the west, melting into the pine forests of Roosevelt National Park and the stone majesty of Crazy Horse Monument. The rain storm was breaking, forks of lightning cutting the air ten miles to the west.

"No problems," I said at last. "Why do you ask?"

"Bullshit. Something's bugging you." She played with one of her dreads, unraveling it, then twisting it tight again. She poked me a second time. "Zed. How long have we been working together? Fifty years?"

I inhaled on the cigarette and exhaled slowly, watching my breath take shape in cigarette smoke. I knew it was impossible, but I felt addicted to nicotine, or at least the act of smoking. And where there's smoke . . .

"I lose track, Missy. From the moment I was picked, time sort of lost its shape for me."

Missy let go of her hair and jangled the keys in her hand, the sound like tiny cymbals. "The Bosses just sent our next job. For after LA."

"When it rains it pours," I said without thinking. "Sorry. Just a little weather humor there, for ya. Har-de-har-har."

Missy wasn't smiling. "We have to go to Wyoming next. Forest fire."

I heard the storm approaching from the west. I never really learned, before I started this job, how to effectively hide my emotions. I could feel my eyes betraying me, showing my fear. "I guess then we'll find out if you and Tee made the right choice."

"Damn it, Zed," Missy began, but I was already moving back to the Monte, heading for the back seat again. The rain would be upon us soon, just an innocent, nearly windless shower, but I didn't want Tee to get wet again through her open window. And Walt Whitman was getting nervous with us gone for so long.

Plus, we needed to get moving. We had a date with an earthquake in LA. Another city, much bigger than Oklahoma City.

The way Robert Frost went was the way all of us will go, eventually. When too much energy converges in one place at the wrong time, it happens.

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When the forces of nature—beyond even the knowledge of the Bosses—converge with too much strength or too quickly for us to react, shit happens.

Shit also happens when some unforeseen human element forces its way like a spike into our carefully modulated work. I've gotten to know most of those in our line of work who are responsible for the other continents, and they all give us their sympathy. Here in North America, we've been getting too many of those unexpected calls lately.

The most recent "unforeseen human element" took place in Oklahoma City.

The reception on our radio had been particularly staticky that day of April. Calls had gone out, first for Bob's services, then for Missy's, then Bob again. All three of us agreed that the call for Missy must have been wrong; she really wasn't needed in this part of the country. We'd shared a quick, nervous laugh about that—who'd ever heard of an earthquake in Oklahoma City?—before heading downtown to the Murrah building by mid-morning. Bob had whined and scratched at the driver's seat on the way there before finally relaxing next to me with his rawhide chewtoy. I almost did something about his whining. Almost, which counts for exactly nothing now.

Instead I let him do his work, even though city work was the worst part of our jobs. I always forced myself not to think of the human cost, the deaths that resulted from what we did for the Bosses. But this particular job, on this particular day, was all bad.

Bob was a true greyhound, his fur the bluish-gray tint that gave his species their name. Slender and noble, he took off at ten minutes to nine, phasing like a natural, circling the federal building as he built the heat, the *flame*. He phased through pedestrians and cars effortlessly, just as we had trained him. Don't think about them, I told myself then. Think about the natural order of our world, and how we help maintain that balance.

He'd begun to flicker with his flame when the first tremor hit. In sympathetic reaction, Missy convulsed in the front seat as the unforeseen explosion began, and I made my fatal error. I took my eyes off Bob to tend to Missy. The Monte Carlo automatically phased us out of the blast radius. But the rest of downtown Oklahoma City was shattered and on fire from the massive explosion deep inside the federal building. The fire wasn't Bob's fire. When Missy had pulled herself together after the man-made earthquake, I looked up. The Murrah building was torn in half, and Robert Frost was gone.

All three of us phased in and out of the wreckage, moving past those we weren't allowed to help, humans that I didn't even *look* at as I blew past, trying to find our greyhound. Tee exhausted herself searching the catacombs beneath the building, while Missy beat her hands bloody trying to shake loose the foundation and uncover his whereabouts. They had both been looking in the wrong place.

We who dispense death and destruction forget too easily that we can also be destroyed. I realized the limitations of our abilities that day, and I realized the folly of our elemental powers when I found Bob twenty feet above me, impaled on a girder, his blue-gray fur singed black with his own unspent heat. We can be caught unawares by the evil that flows in the currents and tides and tremors of just one misguided human mind. We weren't as invulnerable as we'd thought.

I woke from my nightmare memories of Oklahoma to the blessed silence

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of northern Wyoming. Tee was driving, squinting through the steering wheel at Highway 89, a thirty-six pound bag of ProPlan dog food propping her up. She was singing an old gospel number softly as she barreled north toward Old Faithful, her forgotten pipe resting beside her. The chill waters of Shoshone Lake glistened like the distant waves I'd seen too briefly in Southern California.

Missy slept in the back seat, Walt Whitman's back legs stretched onto her lap. Missy was no joke when it came to her work. Today's LA *Times,* now rolled up on the floor under my feet, had reported a magnitude of 6.5 on the Richter scale. Luckily, the quake happened at 3:30 A.M., and the buildings at the intersection of Highways 110 and 10 in southern LA were mostly empty. The sunken façade of the Staples Center and the bashed-in convention center next to it reminded me too much of the devastation in Oklahoma. Ever since the tornado in Iowa and my realization in the Badlands, I couldn't stand the thought of more lives lost, human or otherwise. The greyhound in the back seat was a constant reminder of what we'd all lost.

I never asked to be reminded.

And now, Walt Whitman was going to start earning his keep as our new flame.

"Tee," I said as she ended her song, my hands quivering. I felt as if I'd been drinking cup after cup of coffee.

"Mm-hmm?" Mrs. Thompson said. She glanced at me over the tops of her big spectacles for a quick second, then returned her gaze to the road. She continued humming the same song she'd just finished singing.

I paused for a moment, and then plowed forward. "Have you ever had doubts about what we do?" I asked, afraid to look at her. I picked up her pipe and lit it with the red lighter, bitter tobacco and spices filling my nose.

"Doubts?" Tee laughed, taking the pipe from me. "I'm too old to have doubts about anything, Zed-baby. What's there to doubt? We make the wind blow, we make the earth shake, we make the rains come. And now our puppy is gonna make the flames." She looked at me, her mouth a narrow line around her smoking pipe. "Just like Robert Frost did. Just as good as him."

"I know," I said, hearing the uncertainty in my own voice. But, I wanted to say, he's not Bob. And times are changing. Human nature was becoming stronger than *our* nature. The natural disasters we were responsible for paled in comparison to humanity's self-inflicted disasters. The polluted waters and acid rain. The acts of uncontrolled violence and rage. The dirty air. The bombings.

"What if we made it stop?" I said, the words out of my mouth before I realized it.

The big car swerved. "What?" Mrs. Thompson said with a sudden, surprising anger. "You want to make the Bosses *really* mad? That it?"

I shrugged at her and turned to the window. One and a half minutes from now, if all went according to plan, a fire would be started somewhere up ahead in Yellowstone. Summer-dried trees would go up like oversized matches, and the fire could easily spread to the houses of people miles from where Walt Whitman would start his flame. And as soon as the land was burning, we would be off to our next job, maybe one of my hurricanes, maybe one of Tee's twisters.

Tee parked the car fifteen miles southeast of Old Faithful, next to a stand of hundred-foot pines. I woke Missy and slipped the leash over Walt's narrow head. He leaped out of the car and tried to place his paws on my chest.

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While the fall breeze brought the scent of pines to my nose, I stepped away from him and fumbled for the comforting presence of a cigarette. The sky was unbearably blue.

"Don't worry," Tee said on her way out of the Monte. "Walt will do just fine."

Missy followed us to a clearing in the shade of the tall trees, and the three of us gathered around the prancing dog.

"Ready, rookie?" I said. Walt was pulling at his leash with anticipation, yet his smile was still there. "I hope you guys made the right choice," I said to Missy as I let Walt off the leash. By the time he'd taken five strides he was at full speed, body curved and legs blurring. I could feel his heat already. He was a wonder to watch, I remembered thinking to myself. He may just work out, after all.

Walt was phasing through trees, just as Missy and Tee had taught him, when I saw the two vans parked on the access road to the north. A campsite lay on the other side of the access road. A pair of men stood outside the vans, pacing nervously. I saw the automatic weapons an instant too late, as Walt's flame caught and the chaos began.

I like to think that I would've been a brave person, if I'd been allowed to grow up and live a normal, human life. Maybe I'd have been a cop, or a fireman, like any other kid in the fifties wanted to be. Or maybe I'd be a lawyer and try to put away those people who ruined a good chunk of Yellowstone in their mad cause, whatever that cause had been.

But at nineteen, my age when I was picked for this job, I would never have attempted to stand up to anyone if I'd still been human. It wasn't in my nature, back then. Even now, after Yellowstone, I wouldn't call myself brave. Just angry enough to want to change an outcome or two, if it was within my grasp.

We learned later that the men in the vans had been trying to send a message to the government for years, and they had met at Yellowstone on their way to Cheyenne. Up until that day, their group hadn't been very good at what they were doing, and more and more of their group were getting caught and sent to penitentiaries across the country. Some of them were apprehended the week before New Year's outside Seattle, while others were grabbed in a bar outside Bozeman, Montana, with a truckful of TNT. The guys at Yellowstone had been a bit quicker than their partners; if they'd made it to Cheyenne that day, it would have been their third consecutive bombing. But on that day, they weren't quick enough to avoid the heat of Walt Whitman's flame.

And so, after all these years—has it already been fifty years since I disappeared from my dorm room, smoking what would be my last true cigarette?—I finally remembered on that afternoon in Wyoming how it felt to be afraid and to be angry, angry enough to do something against my nature.

Walt lit the ring of trees, just as the Bosses had ordered him. He was fast and sure-footed, I gave him that. The fire followed him, lighting up the grass and trees in his wake like the tail of a comet. But Walt wasn't quick enough to avoid the explosion when his fire spread onto the brush next to the first van. As the drivers stamped hopelessly at the flames, the first van blew like thunder, picking up Walt and sending a fireball across the access road, toward the campgrounds.

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I felt the cigarette fall from my mouth. This wasn't part of the plan. LA had been hard enough, after we'd seen the security guards trapped inside the convention center when it crumbled. I couldn't sit around and watch any longer.

So I called up rain clouds, thunder rolling across the sky. I knew I could use them to cover both Walt and the burning land around us with rain. But Missy and Mrs. Thompson stopped me before I could let loose the storm clouds.

"Don't," Missy said. I could barely hear her over the explosion of the second van. "Don't throw off the balance."

Walt was still running, fire licking at his legs as he struggled to keep his feet. He ran faster, but he wouldn't be able to outrun the unnatural fire roaring from the vans. He'd been too close.

"Let me," I shouted. I could see people running wildly in the campground area until yellow fire separated us. I can douse it with the rains, I wanted to say. I can save them all, not just Walt, but everyone. The hell with the balance.

Tee shook her head and hit me with a warning gust of wind that knocked me back into the Monte Carlo. She held me there with the wind, watching Walt and the surrounding countryside burn up, her face expressionless.

I glared at Missy, needing her help. Walt Whitman streaked past us once again. The greyhound was panicked, running in wide circles now, barely a step ahead of the chemical fire.

"Look at him," I shouted to Missy as we phased in and out to protect ourselves from the heat. "Not again." I struggled to lift my arm enough to gesture at the inferno taking over the campgrounds. Not again, I repeated silently.

Missy swung from side to side, taking in everything while Tee resolutely held me back. I could hear our dog yelping in pain. With the wind and the growing heat, I couldn't even scream. All I could smell was burning flesh and fur.

Finally, when I was preparing to phase out and escape the fires, Missy made a fist and punched the ground. The tremor knocked Tee off her feet and sent me up and over the Monte Carlo. At last, in the shelter of the big car, I called down all the rain scheduled for next month for the entire Pacific seaboard onto the inferno. The raindrops fell like millions of tiny bombs that covered the southwest corner of Yellowstone Park.

As the rain tore into us and filled the world with a sizzling wetness, Tee turned to me, fear and rage covering her face. She gave me the longest look of my life, and I prepared myself for another blast of wind. But I held my ground and returned her gaze. I needed her to see that what we were doing was right. Thanks to humans, the natural order of our jobs had been destroyed, yet we could still do something about it. We had to; otherwise we were just as bad as the men in the vans.

After what seemed like hours, Tee wiped rain from her tiny forehead and gave me the slightest of nods. I smiled at her and Missy and the wet dog limping our way, and I let the thunder roll across the mountains around us. The rain was cold and cleansing, reminding me that we had it in us to regain a sort of balance, in our own way. And the Bosses were just going to have to accept that. ❍

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HEISENBERG'S GHOST

He may be haunting our home,
or some other.
Perhaps I saw his uncertain shape
in the living room, but
where was he going?

There is so much to learn
if we observe
—and therefore create—
the path he walks.
Does "momentum" still apply,
given that we do not know
if ghosts have mass?
The potential knowledge
is—or may be—astounding!

It is possible that Heisenberg
haunted himself,
revealing the principle
before it was conceived.

I am organizing a seance,
precise location to be determined

—Laurel Winter

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A SLICE AT A TIME

Karin Traviss

Karen Traviss is a journalist and public relations manager from Hampshire, England, who graduated from the Clarion Science Fiction Workshop in 2000. Ms. Traviss has recently completed a novel. "A Slice at a Time" is her first fiction sale. She tells us she's derived her knowledge of aliens and strange worlds from spending too much time with politicians.

It was stress, the psychiatric report said, that had driven the mother to eat her two youngest children. There was nothing to be achieved by prosecuting her.

"But these were healthy youngsters," Nick said. "There was nothing wrong with them at all."

He closed the report on screen. It wasn't the first time that the resident aliens on Maran V had eaten their offspring, but it was unusual for them to eat healthy ones. It was the first time in his stint as senior social worker at the Taranto colony that he'd actually dealt with a cannibalism case.

"What do you think, Ian?"

The trainee social worker he had acquired for the year was crammed in the corner of the twenty-five square meter office. The kid had a fixed wide-eyed expression, as if he'd been freeze-dried in the middle of seeing something terrible.

"Ian? In a case like this, would we recommend prosecution, or would we ask the court for a supervision order?" It was a policy thing, a matter of judgment, and if Ian was going to make it in this job, he would have to take those decisions on his own one day. "Well?"

"Culturally sensitive area," Ian said in a mechanical tone. "Minimum intervention, seek regular client meetings to ensure the safety of offspring still living in the family home."

"Spot on."

Nick had forgotten what it was like to be new to the job: he'd made sure he had. "They take some getting used to, the ussissi," he said. "But give it a year and they'll look just like human clients."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ian.

"Remember, you're seeing the *atypical* members of their species."

"I'll remember that, too."

"We'll need to carry out a home visit ourselves, and then we can file recommendation formally to the court." Nick topped up his coffee from the dis-

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penser and took a very dry cracker out of the packet in his desk drawer. "The key factor here is that the shrink thinks the underlying causes of the cannibalism have eased."

"Meaning?"

"The mother was under a great deal of stress because of the new male in the household. There's always some adjustment. In this case, she snapped."

"Twice?"

"We can regard it as one incident. The children were within months of each other in age, and you have to bear in mind that they were very young, just within the range where a mother would make the decision to destroy them if they were defective. The remaining children are much older."

Ian was rotating his coffee beaker on the tabletop and looking forlorn. Nick held out the packet of crackers to him, but he shook his head. "That's all right, then," he said, but Nick wasn't sure if he meant it.

The kid would get things in perspective, given time.

The drive over to the ussissi part of the settlement took half an hour, not because of the distance, but because it took time to exit the human compound, with its sealed atmosphere and G-class full-spectrum lighting. Nobody went off-camp without a back-up supply of air and water. It wasn't a poisonous atmosphere, just low on oxygen. And it wasn't an arid region, but the local water wasn't quite drinkable if left untreated. It wasn't even a hostile world. Just far enough away from the more easily habitable to remind men that they were invaders.

The ussissi managed to live on it comfortably, though. They always said that it was so much better than the place they'd *left*.

Nick drove out into gently undulating landscape, which would have looked like downland had it not been for the yellow daylight and the greyish vegetation. It gave the place a permanent look of impending storms. But Ian was of the generation born in this colony, so—Nick supposed—the red sun looked normal and the yellow light suggested not storm but another pleasant day.

"I didn't believe they really did that," Ian said.

"Did what?"

"Ate their young. Like rabbits. I thought that it was just one of those stories."

"You locals don't have much contact with them, do you?"

"No. I knew they ate their elderly, though."

Nick wanted to turn to look at the boy, but he found it hard to steer without his eyes fixed on the dirt-track road. "They only eat youngsters when they're defective in some way. They eat their elderly as a matter of course when they get too frail or ill."

"I think it's going to take a lot longer than a year for me to treat them just like us."

"Have you worked with human clients yet?"

"Not many."

"Ever seen an old people's home?"

"No. That's an Earth thing."

"Or tried to fathom parents who've systematically battered their baby?"

Ian didn't reply, and Nick wasn't sure if he was intimidated by the challenge, or just out of words for the day. He drove on in silence.

Ussissi had their own cultural values. It wasn't for humans to intervene,

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unless the creatures broke their own laws or interfered with humans. *A care-home inspection. The stench of shit and an old woman tied to a chair to stop her wandering around.* It was an agreement reached when the ussissi asked to site a colony on the planet, long after the humans first claimed it: human jurisdiction with respect for cultural differences, as long as those differences stayed within their respective settlements. *A post-mortem on a six-month-old baby. Fourteen healed fractures of ribs, skull, and femur, seriously malnourished, skin ulcerated through neglect, and a mother who never, ever saw her boyfriend hurt the kid.*

There were worse things than being eaten.

"Put your oxygen on," said Nick. "Nearly there."

A home visit to a ussissi family meant a meeting in a communal hall. The chambers where the families lived were too small by a meter all round for a human to negotiate comfortably, and the creatures were usually understandably agitated by the dominating presence of a large human in their quarters. The communal hall gave everyone a little safe space.

It smelled wrong: it was dry, very dry, but the place smelled as wet and fungal as a forest. Even with the oxygen mask on, Nick could still taste a scent not unlike the woodland round his childhood home. And there the similarity ended.

The three ussissi parents huddled in a group, the two smaller ones on either side of the larger "mother." Nick squatted down on his haunches, and Ian followed suit. Everyone exchanged non-hostility gestures as best they could, and Nick placed the flat, hand-sized portable translator on the ground between them.

"Our doctor thinks that your children should stay with you." Nick waited while the software translated in thin tones from its small speakers: simple words stood less chance of misinterpretation. "A human will visit you every seven cycles to see that everything is all right. Are you willing?"

Nick waited. It was hard to communicate with a creature without eyes. Strictly speaking, that wasn't true: ussissi could see, but their sensors weren't committed to two points like a human's. They were spread all over the head. Combined with the identifiable mouth—that needle-ringed, vivid, cartoon-caricature mouth—it gave ussissi an appearance of savage hairless little animals.

The mother emitted a series of high-pitched grunts. Nick had no idea what other sounds there might be, out of the range of his hearing. "I agree. I want children to stay." The translator paused. "I regret. I regret."

The men eased themselves back on to their feet, Ian with more grace than Nick.

Without warning, there was a sound from one of the chambers: a sudden, sharp infant squeal that went right off the scale and left them pressing their ears, and then ended abruptly. Nick didn't need an interpreter to understand it. Ian made an involuntary move in the general direction, but the older man put a restraining hand on his arm.

"None of our business, remember?"

"Nick!"

"We respect their cultural differences. They're technological, organized, literate. Not animals. Just *different*."

All the way back to the colony, Ian said nothing, nothing at all. It was a long time before he spoke again.

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For a social worker, Taranto Colony was as near to Shangri-La as anywhere was ever going to get. The population was still small, well educated, fit, and pretty well socially homogeneous. There was no under-class, not yet. That didn't mean that wife-beating and child abuse and neglect of the elderly didn't still happen, of course. It was just a smaller caseload. But that suited Nick fine.

Whether it suited Ian was another matter, and Nick had his doubts. The boy didn't seem to be settling. It was six months into his probationary period, and he was still taking things far too personally.

"You have to learn to let go, kid," Nick told him during lunch. "What's normal for you isn't normal for other families. And it's *definitely* not normal for ussissi!"

Ian was sitting with an uneaten sandwich in his hands. He was a thin, freckled boy, and he looked as if he needed to eat. Nick preferred women on the team: they were a lot tougher. They built thick skins very easily. But Ian was as raw to the touch as ever.

"Nick, you've been here ten years, right?" Ian said.

"Six years on Earth, ten here."

"And you prefer here?"

"I prefer here." *Don't do a home visit with a potentially violent client on your own, take back-up. One of you stays in the car at all times. Sarah's been a long time in there. Is she okay? Oh, God. . . .* "Definitely, I prefer here."

"Why do we even get involved with aliens?"

"It's not benevolent. It's precautionary, because it's less provocative to keep an eye on them through a social worker than through the military."

Ian looked as if he were chewing the idea over, which was more than he was doing with the sandwich. It was as close as Nick had been able to get to a heart-to-heart with him.

Then he raised his eyes. His expression was surprising: Nick had expected to see something that would make him want to reassure the kid, but instead there was pity.

Pity, and a little revulsion.

"You don't see it, do you?" Ian said.

"We're not manipulating them. We respect their—"

"It's nothing to do with the aliens. It's *us*."

"I don't get it."

"It's crept up on you, hasn't it? A slice at a time. You've gotten so used to things by degrees that you can't see wrong for what it is."

"You can't take things too hard in this line of work. It'll burn you out."

"That's got nothing to do with the basic issue." Ian was the manifestation of clarity and youthful conviction now, not the thin ginger-haired geek who looked like he needed teaching about Life. "We rationalize so that we can convince ourselves that what we see isn't *wrong*. That's what gets me. That's how we get to be able to treat it as normal, by taking it in small doses. Makes evil easier to swallow, right?"

His voice cut off as if he'd left the room. Instead, he was still sitting there, silent. Abruptly, he began biting into his sandwich. Nick was unprepared to challenge that silence, but he'd have to try.

"It's not all bad stuff," he said at last. "We support the elderly, we help people get back to work after illness. There are plenty of good things to see in this job." *Sarah, not quite herself after months in hospital, speech perma-*

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nently slurred from a fractured skull, never able to work again. "You have to think of all the things we do that *aren't* dealing with the dregs."

"Really?" Ian had finished his sandwich, and his expression said that he would no longer believe anything Nick might say. "And that balances the books?"

"Ian, I came into this job thinking that I could put things right, but in the end, you just have to do the best you can. How can I moralize about these creatures eating their disabled kids when I've seen what human parents do? You think *that's* any better? At least ussissi don't batter and rape them!"

"No, they eat them, and it doesn't happen every day, but they *do* it just the same."

"Okay, say that we take these infants into our care. I tried that, once, with this little thing that couldn't walk, and we fed it and kept it alive. But it could never be accepted by its own society, and we ended up trying to stop it bashing its own head against the wall for hours because it was so isolated and terrified."

"And what happened to it?"

"We returned it to its family. Yes, I knew what would happen. And no, I couldn't save the whole bloody world, so I just did my best!"

Nick was suddenly embarrassed by his outburst. Ian stared back at him, a total contrast with his flat cold disapproval. No, Ian would probably never listen to him again.

Nick went back to his screen and tried to recall happy old ladies settled in new assisted housing, icons of dignified, independent old age.

But he couldn't. Not right then.

Taranto was a pleasant colony, no doubt about it. Nick sat in the green, rustling atrium at the heart of the complex and enjoyed ginger tea and a news download. You could play god in a colony. If you wanted translucent dendrobiums cascading from bark above the shops, you could have them, and you could have strelitzias in the borders, and apricot trees in fruit, and it didn't matter at all that the main purpose of the vegetation was that you needed ten square meters of it to provide renewable oxygen for one human. There was more to life than breathing.

Sometimes, it was hard to appreciate the small good details in life. Nick tried hard to keep in practice, because as surely as he managed to shut out the demons, he had shut out the angels, too. It got harder over the years. The door didn't discriminate: he kept it shut.

He wandered back down the colonnade, which ran alongside a miniature artificial river, and a weir built solely to create the sound of rushing water. One day, he would come back and enjoy this when he had the time. Did ussissi ever come here? He'd only seen a handful inside the settlement, and those looked to be on official business. There was nothing stopping them entering—not yet. They just didn't come.

When he got back to his office, there was a note waiting for him on the messaging system. It was from Ian. It spoke of his regret that he had to resign, but he felt that he would be happier doing an administration job in the planning department. He had an interview later that week, so would Nick mind doing a reference for him? Nick didn't mind at all. The lad wasn't really suited for social work.

And Nick didn't need Ian's constant reminders that there were things to which he was determined to be blind. Life would get back to normal now.

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There were no trainees for the next four months, but there wasn't much of a caseload either, so Nick felt no pressure. He had time to complete admin work and proposals for the first time in ages. The phone didn't ring much either; he could have the video link on during office hours to watch the news. It was all pretty comfortable.

He kept thinking that right up to the time the receptionist buzzed him and said that there was an ussissi in an agitated state at the front desk, unable to make much use of the translator but insistent on "Nick, Nick, Nick."

"I'll see her," he said, because he knew that there was only one ussissi who would make the journey and ask for him personally. He went out to show her in.

And he was wrong.

It wasn't the cannibal mother. It was a much older female, as he could tell from the dark color of her shark-skin limbs. She fell against the furniture as she came in, an eyeless sloth with a cartoon mouth of teeth. The high-pitched squeals were almost painful. He stood back and let her circle the room unsteadily until she came to an exhausted halt, flanks heaving.

Nick got down on all fours and edged up close enough to her to get the translator between them so that they could both reach it.

"I'm Nick," he said. "What's your name?"

A pause, and shrills came out of the machine. "Ressi."

"What's wrong?"

"Die, die, die."

"Someone's dead?"

"Me. *I* die."

For a moment, he thought that she was ill. He knew little about ussissi physiology. Then he looked at the age of her, the charcoal skin, her unsteady gait, and the picture focused sharply in his head. She was old. It was her time to die, and she hadn't died on time.

"Are you afraid?"

"I will not die."

"Your family wants to . . . eat you?"

"I will not die." The creature put her little clammy three-fingered paw on his forearm. He never could understand why creatures who could live in such an arid world felt and smelled so damp. "Help me."

"What can I do?"

"Help me."

"I'm not allowed to interfere with your laws."

"Help me. Help me." A pause. "Nick."

He never took things too personally. But she had *made* it personal. It was as if she had bound him to the problem simply by invoking his name. And he suddenly saw a frightened old lady cowering before him.

"Nick, you can't keep the thing there."

"She's a client."

"Yes, and her family want her back. You can't interfere."

"Jesus Christ, Sanjay, they're going to *eat* her! Have you thought what that means? They are going to kill her and eat her. It's not even a lethal injection."

"It's their culture. We have a non-interference agreement."

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"Oh yeah, and because it's *her* culture, she's perfectly happy with it? Then why is she in *here,* begging me to save her?"

"You really need to consider your position."

Nick killed the audio for a few moments and sat looking at his manager's face on screen. Then he glanced across at Ressi, who was curled up in the corner, dozing, with the remains of a plate of greens in front of her. It was the only thing he could find in the office fridge that she would eat. She'd been in his office for two days now.

"I'm really uncomfortable with this," he said. "I have a professional code of ethics I have to follow. A vulnerable client has specifically asked for my protection. What the hell do you expect me to *do?*"

"Stick to the rules," said Sanjay. "Don't interfere in families when you don't have to."

"I try not to." *No, I don't think we should take the kid into care or prosecute the father. We shouldn't break families up.* "I really do try."

"You've got to talk her into going back. Her family is furious. There's a lot of ill-feeling in the ussissi community about this."

"And the administration is keen to see this resolved."

"This isn't the time or place for big ethical gestures, Nick."

Don't break the family up. "When might that time *be,* then?"

"Don't piss around. Just *do* it, okay?"

"I'll think about it."

Nick shut off the link and thought about Ian. He hoped that the kid was happier, processing plans for new domes and fine colonnades. Right now, though, he could have used a dose of his certainty, the certainty born of a clear, uncompromised view of things as they really were. *Evil got you a slice at a time.* Ian had never had the time to build up layer upon layer of the coping lies and rationalizations you needed to pretend to yourself that you weren't complicit in something very, very bad. He just saw the beast for itself.

Nick watched Ressi sleeping and wondered if he had been an evil man. No, he couldn't accept that. Had he done bad things? Yes. Stupid, inexcusable things, if you looked in from the outside. *Don't break the family up.* Why had he shut it all out? Because that was what professionals did, and that was what objective people did.

That was also what cowards did.

He didn't want that door in his head to open, but memory forced the lock, and he remembered how he would deal with the undealable as a child. Not understanding what glue mousetraps were. Having his father explain it to him. Finding his breath temporarily jammed in his throat, and then imagining the terror and slow misery of the mouse. Finding the image so terrible that it jumped out at him at random moments, and the only way he could stop the insistent pain in his heart was to see it over and over and over again until it had lost all meaning, and he could sleep again.

Evil had a stealth all its own.

Ressi stirred. She turned her head toward him. "I not die. You help."

He didn't know if it was a question or a statement. The machine wasn't efficient at inflections. "I help," he said.

Nick tried to tell Sanjay that this wasn't like trying to save a youngster. All Ressi wanted was to die in her own time, and when she had, the family could have the body. But Sanjay wasn't giving way; the non-interference

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agreement had to stand, and Ressi would be taken back to her family one way or another. Nick cut the video link.

There was nothing about the incident on the news, perhaps because ussissi didn't use the media and humans didn't give a damn. But Nick locked the doors to his office just in case. On day four, he sent the receptionist home and asked her to divert emergency calls to the health service.

He could sit it out; he had a couple of weeks' supply of food, and access to a washroom. In a few days, Sanjay would realize he meant business, and then they would find somewhere to accommodate Ressi in her final days. She was just one old lady. How difficult could it be?

He was wrong. After eight days, the administration lost their patience with him, and four troopers kicked down his office door. It happened fast and methodically. One snatched up Ressi from the pile of cushions on the floor, and the others pinned Nick against the wall.

It made him proud that it took all three of them to hold him, and that the only way they stopped him punching free was a rifle butt to the head. It didn't knock him cold: movies lied. *Sarah, in a pool of her own blood, just breathing. I warned you never to take chances with unstable clients.*

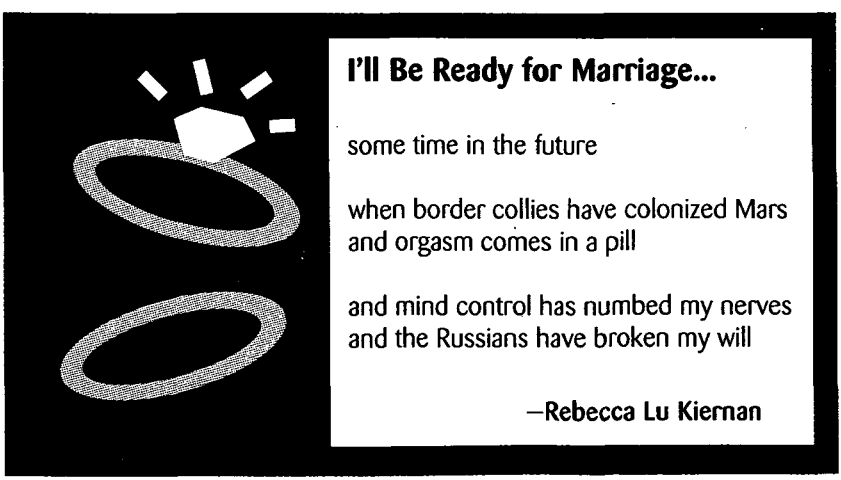
He could still hear everything around him.

The high warbling scream faded, with a touch of Doppler, down the corridor. There was no point yelling "Ressi!" after her, because she couldn't have understood, but he did it anyway. He yelled for all the times he'd never yelled. He yelled for all the times he'd wanted to punch an abuser and never knew it. He yelled until his guts hurt.

The faces above him were blurred and their voices, shot with panic, merged into one stream of sound. "We'll get a medic, mate, take it easy—Christ, why did you hit him that hard?—I'm sorry, mate, I know how tough it must be—will they fire him for this?"

Nick no longer cared. He could *see* everything again. Evil couldn't sneak up on him or cut him a slice at a time any more. The door was open, and the devils had burst through, but they weren't alone.

There were a few angels behind them. In time, he'd get to know them, too. ❍



I'll Be Ready for Marriage...

some time in the future

when border collies have colonized Mars
and orgasm comes in a pill

and mind control has numbed my nerves
and the Russians have broken my will

—**Rebecca Lu Kiernan**

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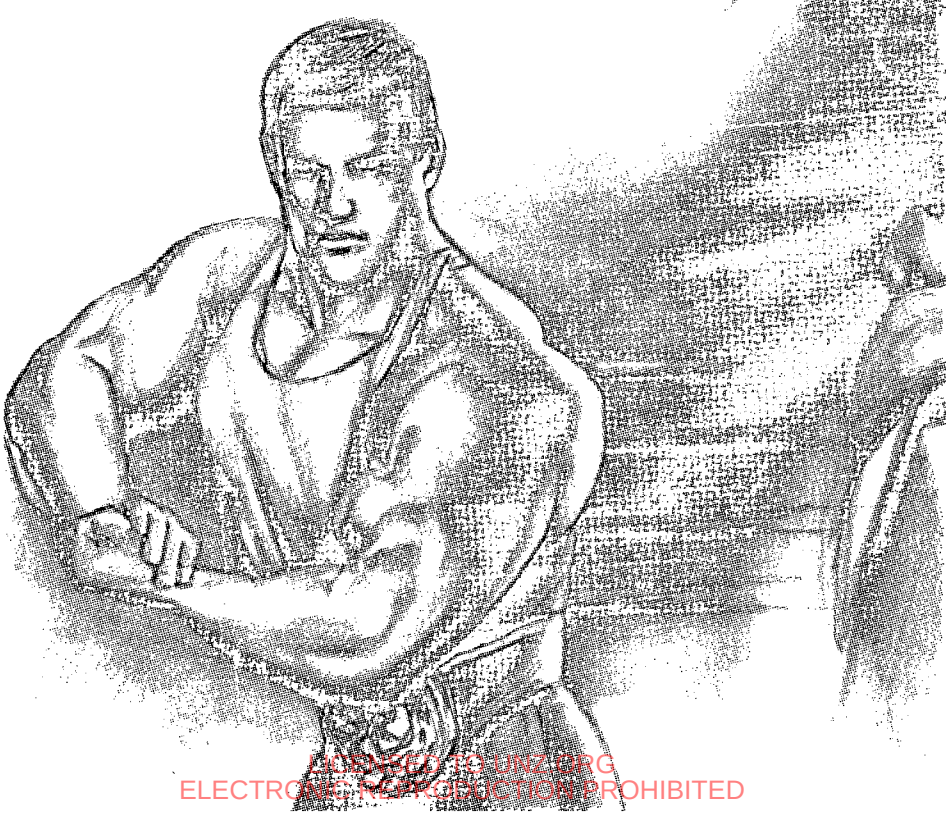
In 1996, Pat Cadigan moved from the Kansas City area, where she had spent most of her life, to the borough of Haringey in London, England, achieving the Zen status of being both Pat and ex-pat. Her enlightenment is enhanced by her son Rob Fenner and her husband, Chris Fowler. When not writing novels and short fiction or working on pro-wrestling articles for Doug Winter, she runs a monthly science fiction interview/discussion evening at Borders Books. Her next novel, *Reality Used to Be a Friend of Mine*, will be out in the UK later this year.



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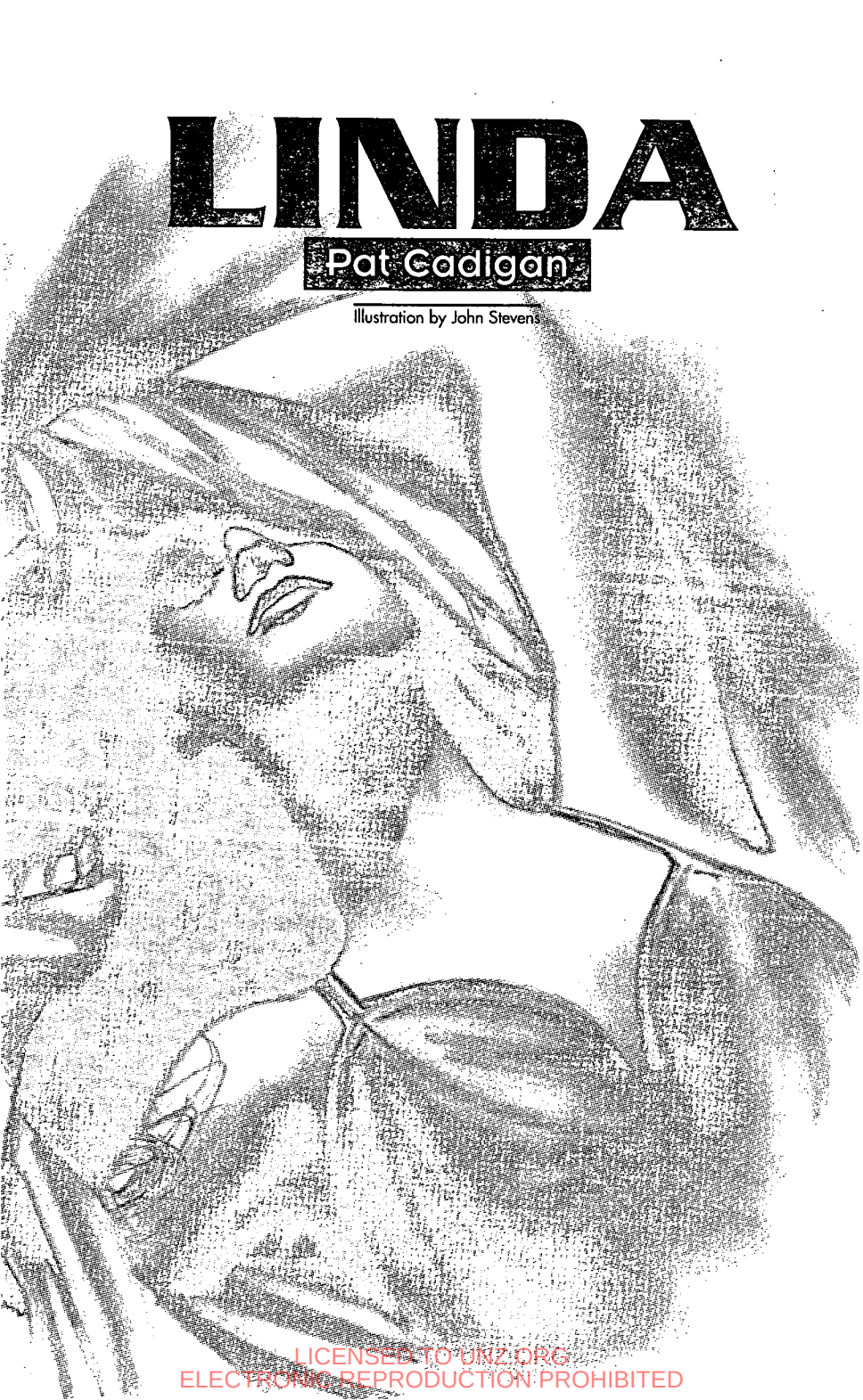
LINDA

Pat Cadigan

Illustration by John Stevens



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"Oh, come *on,* Dez," I said, putting the phone down. "It's *Linda.* Remember Linda? She's always been there for us when *we've* needed *her.*"

My sister cracked another pistachio nut on her bottom front teeth with one hand and waved the other at me. "Thanks, sis, I was in danger of amnesia. Think she'd still be there if we needed her on a daily basis? Or maybe hourly?"

"Oh, come on."

"Not a chance." Dez turned back toward the television, saw I'd put on wrestling, and turned back toward me, exasperated. "Have you really *no* taste whatsoever? On top of everything else?"

"Big talk for a woman who taped the Brad Pitt film festival so she could watch it till her ears bled."

She worked on another nut. "Brad has class. Plus he never phones me unexpectedly asking me to rescue him from his latest mistake."

"Only because he doesn't have your number, I'm sure," I said. "Or his wife doesn't. If she did, maybe she'd be on the horn right now, begging you to take him off her hands."

"Could be." Desirée shrugged and spat a shell into an ex-ashtray. The last vestiges of my sister's dead habit were the ashtrays, which had all become receptacles for nut hulls of various kinds. *I quit smoking and went nuts,* she liked to say. "But they *don't* have my number. *I,* on the other hand, *do* have Linda's number, and I am most definitely *not* going out to pick her up. If I were just a tiny bit more cynical—and that's just a *tiny* bit, Cleo—I'd think Linda's generous nature was just so she could try to get *carte blanche* for whatever she wanted. You go if you want. I won't try to talk you out of it. You can even bring her back here, I won't object. But if she's the least bit inconvenient for me—and I mean the *least* bit, like, she's in the bathroom when I have to go, she's sitting on the couch where *I* want to sit, she uses up anything I want or eats anything I was saving for myself, if she so much as talks to me when I don't want to be disturbed—"

"I get the picture, Ms. Compassion." I sighed and picked up my purse and jacket. "So don't wait up for me, I'll take her to a hotel. And don't worry, I move into my new apartment next week." I headed for the door.

"Cleo."

I stopped and turned to my sister. She was kneeling on the couch with her back to the TV, resting her forearms along the back and looking, to her credit, slightly embarrassed.

"I wasn't taking a shot at *you,*" she said, "and you know that. What I meant was that when someone keeps doing the same stupid thing over and over, the time comes when you have to throw up your hands, take a step back and say, 'Honey, you're on your own.' Continuing to play along is that thing called *enabling.* You remember *enabling,* right? Early 1990s, the chicest thing *not* to do and damn if it isn't still a great idea today."

I nodded. "So if this one kills her, she was asking for it?"

Dez's expression flickered between stony and hurt. There was a long moment of silence and then she turned around and sat down, her back to me now. "Okay if I turn off the wrestling? Seeing as how you'll be out all night?"

"No problem," I said. "How kind of you to ask."

Linda was waiting in the Block's where she had called from. There weren't a lot of people in the place at this time of night—the local club, or what passes for a club in this part of the world, which is given more to

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shopping malls than nightlife, hadn't let out yet. Another couple of hours and people would start pouring in, hungry in that way that only being drunk for a few hours can make you, ready for Block's moderately greasy twenty-four hour menu.

She was in a booth way in back, in an area that seemed to be closed. Compassionate waitress, probably. I went over and slid in across from her. She had her head bowed, a large baseball-style cap pulled low over her face and her hand placed strategically across her eyebrows.

"Don't be scared," I said. "It's just me."

"I know," she whispered. She didn't move. After a moment, I reached over and gently pulled her hand down.

"Oh my *God.* Oh, *Jesus,* Linda—" I put a hand over my mouth. One eye was swollen shut, and both of them were black, which is what happens when you break your nose—or, as in Linda's case, someone breaks it for you. There was an enormous blood spot in her left eye and the left side of her jaw was one big swollen Technicolor bruise.

"I told the hostess I'd been in a car accident and just got out of the emergency room," she said hoarsely. "The second part was true."

"Where's Steve?" I said. "Have you called the police? Does he know where you are? Did you have any idea that—" I stopped.

"Did I have any idea that what?" Linda said calmly. "That the man I married would abruptly decide that I was in very serious need of a beating? That he would come home early from work and wait inside the house to ambush me when *I* got home from work?" She swallowed. "Actually, no. Came as a complete surprise, caught me completely flatfooted. So am I dumb or what?" She waited a beat. "The answer to that one is, yes, I'm dumb. I'm surprised at you, Cleo. That was an easy one."

"Is it?" I said. "Funny, I was pretty sure that there was nothing all *that* simple. Not real life with real people. I remember learning that one in college."

The bill of her cap remained pointed downward. I could hardly tell if she was breathing. "I remember college," she said after a bit. "The good old days. Simpler times. No glove, no love. Party like it's 1999. Rape crisis centers, abortion clinics, and battered-women's shelters on every other block, so you could always get the help you needed, no matter what. Of course, if you ended up on a first-name basis with everyone at all three places, they figured that maybe you needed a completely different kind of help. Right?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know anyone like that."

Now she looked up. Her face was such a mess that I couldn't tell whether she was on the verge of tears or about to tell me off. "Yeah, sure you don't. Look, Cleo, I *know* what you and Dez must think of me at this point but please, don't play dumb. Especially when it's a lot dumber than you think *I* am."

I reached across the table and put a hand on her wrist. Under the long sleeve of her plaid flannel shirt, I could feel an Ace bandage. "I'm not going to speak for Dez," I said, "because my baby sister has always preferred shooting her own mouth off."

This got a ghost of a smile out of her.

"But I don't know what to think because you haven't told me anything. All I *can* think is that you got the living shit beat out of you tonight by someone you loved and trusted and no matter what anyone else might say, I refuse to believe that you saw it coming and you didn't duck. So to speak."

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Linda shuddered a little. "Thanks," she whispered.

"What do you want to do?" I said. "Do you want to stay here and eat, do you want to go somewhere and go to bed?"

She hesitated, glancing at the front, no doubt thinking of all the clubbers who would be descending on the place before long. And I knew she hadn't missed the way I'd said *go somewhere* rather than *go home with me.*

"I've got enough money for a couple of nights in a hotel," she said finally. "After that, I—"

"I'll go with you," I told her. "And it's on me. We'll have a pajama party. Order some dirty movies on the cable and watch them with the sound down, supply our own dialog. Remember doing that?" I slid out of the booth and hurried around to help her. She was finding it very difficult and painful to move. They'd taped her ribs at the emergency room. I felt a flash of pure fury at Steve, followed by puzzlement. I'd known Steve almost as long as I'd known Linda and the last thing I'd have ever thought him capable of was using his fists on a woman he loved—or anyone else. I chattered on to cover my sudden confusion. "Remember that pure classic we saw, *Thar She Blows* starring the immortal Phil Leshio? Ever wonder what Phil's doing these days?"

"Probably lying on a beach in Mexico thinking that the people who paid money to see that kind of cheesy porn were ten times stupider than anyone who acted in it. The last thing I want to see tonight is a dirty movie, Cleo."

I wanted to sink into the carpet and begin a new life as a grease stain. "I'm sorry, Linda. I wasn't actually serious. I was just trying to make you laugh by—"

"Ordinarily," she said, talking over my fumbling apology, "ordinarily, Phil makes me laugh. As you, of all people, would know. But Phil does not make me laugh tonight. Okay?"

Rape-crisis centers, abortion clinics, and battered-women's shelters on every other block. . . . "Oh, *God,* Linda," I said, before I could think better of it.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she said, holding up her hand to tell me not to say anything else. "In fact, I'm just fine, in case you're really wondering. I had my tubes tied a long time ago. Right after Ted committed suicide." She put her hand on my shoulder and leaned heavily on it as we walked through the restaurant and out to my car.

Linda sat down carefully on one of the two queen-sized beds. "This is not a motel," she said. "This is a Doubletree."

"Do you have something against cable-TV and room service breakfast?" I asked, throwing myself down on the other bed. "If you do, tough. We're here, we can't back out."

"Can you afford this?" she asked.

"I've been living with Dez for two weeks. Can I *not* afford it?" I laughed, but she only smiled a little. "We're really in each other's hair this time," I added. "It's my new passion. She can't stand it."

"What?"

"Pro wrestling."

Linda burst out with a spontaneous laugh and then grabbed her ribs. "Oh, no, don't make me laugh like that, it hurts."

I was glad to see that she *could* laugh. "Well, I'm sorry, but it's true. Really well built men in skin-tight costumes—or really skimpy costumes.

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There's this one guy who's about seven feet tall and he does *not* weigh ninety pounds. Hair down to here—" I kissed my fingers to heaven. "There *is* a God. And She loves me and wants me to be happy."

Linda was wearing that expression again, the one that told me I'd just stuck my foot in another booby-trap.

"You think there's a God." It was a flat statement, neither a question nor a challenge.

"If you want to talk seriously about the existence of a deity, that's something else," I said. "I was just, well, you know."

"I know. You're a good friend to do all this *and* try to make me laugh," Linda said. She took the baseball cap off and I saw a bald patch at the top of her head that had been sewn up with about a dozen stitches. "I mean it. That old saying about laughter being the best medicine is really true." She paused for a moment. "Probably a lot truer than the existence of a God who loves us and wants us to be happy."

There was a brief moment. "I'd say amen to that," I said finally, "except I don't think it's the right word under the circumstances."

Linda grabbed her ribs again. "I *told* you not to make me laugh, it hurts." I hadn't heard anything like a laugh come from her. She got up from the bed and shuffled to the bathroom, where she paused at the doorway, her hand on the light switch. "Do you ever give much thought to the supernatural, Cleo?"

"What flavor?" I asked her. "Angels? Miracles? Satan? Astrology, biorhythms? Ghosts?"

She slipped into the bathroom and stayed there a long time.

I had to pee so badly by the time she came out again, it was a real effort not to meet her as the door opened again and help her out of the way.

"Sorry," she called after me. "It takes so long because it hurts so much to move."

"Well, if you need any help next time," I called through the mostly closed door.

"Thanks. Don't take this the wrong way, but I'd rather do it myself," Linda called back from the bed. "It's like being able to say that I'm getting better already, that I don't have to have someone help me potty."

"Fine," I said, after washing my hands and coming out again. "Just don't try the bath or shower on your own, though, okay?"

She was sitting up on pillows piled against the headboard, pointing the remote control at the television. "I'm only good for cat baths right now, anyway." The welcome-to-the-Doubletree channel came up looking a bit on the blue side.

"Hey, remember DBTV?" I said. "When we met those guys in Austin and they invited us back to their place? The cable company was a little on the lean side and they had this channel that was nothing but a deep blue screen twenty-four hours a day? They called it Deep Blue TV. We watched it and ate Doritos and that guy's chili—what did he call it? Exploding Death's Head. And we made up TV series."

"Yeah, I remember," Linda said. "I'm beginning to think my whole life is composed only of stuff I want to remember and nothing I want to live through." She flipped through a couple of complimentary movie channels, the History Channel, CNN, and then came to the tail end of some show on one of the local channels. It was one of those reality shows, real police car pursuits or something. She put the remote down on the nightstand between the beds. I gave her a puzzled look. "News is coming up."

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"Ah," I said, stretching out on the other bed. "This must be the channel with the cute blond weather guy—the one who wears the striped shirts and suspenders."

"I'm just used to their news is all."

I was about to give her a hard time and then thought better of it. There was something bleak that I'd never heard before in her voice, a tone that suggested, suddenly, that in spite of what she might have said, she really hadn't been in any danger of hurting herself laughing over my attempts to cheer her up.

Well, of course not, dumb-ass, I thought. *She just got the living shit beat out of her by her* husband, *by* Steve, *whom everyone would have sworn wouldn't harm a fly, and you're teasing her about having a crush on a local weatherman. Yeah,* that's *a laugh riot.*

When I returned from my guilt trip, the news was already on with Wayne Wonderful and Pauline Perky (voted the top anchor team three years in a row—I never could remember their names). Mr. Wonderful gave us a rundown of anything important nationally and then turned us over to the Perkstress for the local lowdown. She'd gone back to corkscrew curls in a topknot and high lace collars. That was all the fun of watching Pauline Perky do the news, just to see what look she'd had foisted off on her by the station's make-up and wardrobe department. If that sounds sexist, it is. It's what comes of living in an area where television journalism is where models go when their careers die. I was about to make an abominably catty remark on the subject to Linda when I heard the Perky one say something important.

"The Tri-County emergency room is still puzzling over the case of the battered woman who disappeared earlier this evening. The woman, known only as Lynn or possibly Linda, was in her mid-to-late thirties, and had appeared at the entrance to the emergency room alone, possibly after driving herself there. She was treated for injuries sustained from a severe beating by her boyfriend or husband. Afterward, Tri-County nurses arranged for her to meet with representatives from a nearby women's shelter, but when those representatives arrived, the woman had gone. Tri-County emergency staff is very worried about her as her injuries were quite extensive and the possibility of internal injury had not been ruled out. The woman is five-four or five-five—"

"Five-six, you airhead," Linda muttered.

"—with light-brown or dark blonde hair about shoulder-length. Although she arrived at the hospital wearing a white T-shirt—heavily bloodstained—and jeans, she may now be wearing a pair of grey sweatpants, a man's plaid flannel shirt, and a baseball cap, items stolen from another patient."

"That's it, bitch. Give him a perfect description," jeered Linda. "Why don't you show my picture from the security camera now?"

And then, so help me God, they did exactly that. It wasn't a very good picture because it was blurry and low-resolution, and only showed her from the back as she was leaving. You'd have had to have known it was Linda to recognize her. We looked at each other. "Do you do lottery numbers, too?" I asked her.

"Maybe I should try. Maybe I'd do better picking numbers than men." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

I reached for the remote to lower the volume on the TV. "So that's the story? The bare bones of it, anyway?"

Linda didn't move. "That's what happened, more or less."

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"Why did you take off?" I asked her.

"I overheard the nurse telling someone she was going to call the women's shelter to send someone."

"Would that have been so bad?"

"The someone," Linda sighed, "was Betty Felder. Who is, for the benefit of the memory-impaired in the room, the woman who dressed my wounds after Ted. And Ronny. And the accountant I met for drinks that time. And who called me after someone very helpfully notified her about how I was being stalked by the aluminum siding salesman. And the software engineer. And the cop who was supposed to protect me from both of them. The only other person in the entire world I wanted to see even less than Steve right then was Betty Felder. I could just imagine what she'd say."

"Why didn't you just tell the nurse to ask them to send someone else? Or ask her to call another shelter?"

Now she raised her head and looked at me. "Well, strange as this may seem to you, I wasn't really thinking very straight at the time. Can't imagine why."

"Don't get mad at me, Linda," I said. "I really, really didn't mean anything. I'm sorry. I'm really trying to understand but it's hard. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. I've never been through *any* of what you've been through. All told, I think you do pretty well."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes again, almost smiling a little.

"I didn't really mean that to sound so . . . trite," I went on. "Or twitty or dumb-ass. But really, Linda, you're like Superwoman. I don't know anyone else who could have come through any of the shit you've had to—"

"Superwoman? Super-*victim,* you mean."

I started to say something and she held up a hand.

"Come on, don't think I don't know what people say about me. The walking bull's-eye. Wherever she is it's ground zero. *It must be something she does to antagonize them.*"

"Linda, *I* don't believe that and I doubt—"

"Did you ever hear of the fifteen-minute rule?" she asked me, raising her head again. "It's a charming little thing the police came up with to assess domestic disturbances. You know how they talk to the man and the woman separately and then switch off?" She put her fingertips to her forehead for a moment in mock absentmindedness. "No, of course you don't. Nothing like this has ever happened to you. Well, now you know, I just told you. Anyway, when they do that, they each invoke the fifteen-minute rule. The fifteen-minute rule states that if, after talking to the woman for fifteen minutes you want to slug her yourself, you don't arrest the guy. That's a good one, isn't it?"

I could only stare at her.

"They get sensitivity training these days, of course, but the old ways die hard." She paused, staring past me. "Some things never die. Can you get me some ice so I can put it on my eye?"

"Sure thing. Do you want a steak to go with it? I mean, are you hungry?"

"If I ate anything, I think I'd just throw up. Anyway, it hurts to chew."

"Milkshake?"

"Just the ice, Cleo. Please."

I did as she asked, feeling a little funny. I was half afraid that I'd come back and find the room empty—or that, for some absurd and unguessable reason, she'd be on the phone to Steve. But when I came back with the room

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bucket full from the ice machine down at the end of the hall, she was sitting on the bed in the same position. As far as I could tell, she hadn't moved. I improvised an icepack for her using a hand-towel and the hotel-supplied shower-cap and then fixed the pillows around her so she could lie comfortably without having to hold the thing in place.

"Were you a nurse in a former life?" Linda asked me, letting out a long breath and relaxing probably for the first time all night.

"Not hardly, or I'd have known to do this without your asking," I said. "But I *have* had a few bumps and scrapes myself."

"But not courtesy of any of your relationships."

I shrugged, remembered she couldn't really see me and said, "Mm," as noncommittally as I could.

"It's okay, Cleo, really. Perhaps I should try to see myself as a human deterrent for smart women who would otherwise make foolish choices, or however the saying goes. If my example saves just one woman from a similar mistake, then my life hasn't been wasted."

"I think the worst thing about it," I said firmly, sitting down next to her on the bed, "is the way it's made you so horribly down on yourself. You talk like you really believe you're the one with the problem."

"Problem." She let out another long breath, with a shudder in it. "One abusive relationship is a problem. Two is the start of a neurotic pattern that has to be nipped in the bud and torn out at the roots. Abuse from three total strangers, one after another, that's the sort of thing that has you wondering if you've done something that pissed God off, or whether He's just got another bet going with the devil. But then finally, you straighten your life out—no more stalkers, no more violent men. No more men. You have your friends, you keep busy, you make a place for yourself and you find you're living a normal life—except that you don't date.

"There's interest, of course, from time to time. And sometimes well-meaning 'friends' try to fix you up with someone they know, although your real friends know how you feel about that kind of thing and they never put you in that position."

She paused for a long moment, maybe waiting to see if I'd interrupt. Or maybe hoping I would, I wasn't sure which. But I had a feeling she needed to get it all out.

"And then you meet a really *nice* guy. You know he's a really nice guy because even his ex-girlfriend is still a friend, and he knows all of your friends, and everybody vouches for him. But you can't bring yourself to take the next step after friendship because of the nightmares. And the really nice guy says, okay. Let's be friends. And he really means it.

"Pretty soon, you realize you're sharing just about everything you'd want to share with someone you were married to—or all but married to—or wanted to be married to. But it's hard because you're so damned *fucked up.* And the really nice guy says, okay, let's go to counseling together."

I'd heard a lot of this already from both Steve and Linda, but I kept quiet, letting her go on. I didn't really know where she was going with it but I couldn't get over the feeling that if I so much as shifted position or cleared my throat, she'd clam up.

"So you go to counseling and they try to make you understand that your whole life has been something like one big aversion therapy to the things you want. But you don't have to let it go on like that. They keep hammering on that one over and over. You don't have to keep being a victim. You

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can get back up on your hind legs and say, what the hell, let's go for it. Because if you stay all curled up in your little storm shelter, the bad guys win and the nice guys lose. Your nice guy in particular. And that's the one that finds its way into you—the fact that the bastard Ted wins if he manages to make you too afraid to live. Because you know that's what the shithead wanted. So you force yourself to laugh at your *real* fears, the ones that grab you by the neck at three and four in the morning that you've never told anyone about.

"And then one day, you come home from work and you see your husband's car already in the garage. He's home early. You think that's great, because then the evening can start early. But when you walk in the door, you hear this voice call out to you, a voice you've heard over and over in your nightmares, saying: 'Honey, I'm home and you've got a lot of explaining to do!'"

She'd had her eyes closed the whole time she'd been speaking. Now she opened the one that wasn't under the ice pack and looked at me, gauging my reaction. "Ugly," I said. "That's about the ugliest thing I've *ever* heard. I can't believe he would *do* such a thing—"

Linda's eye closed again. "He didn't."

"He didn't?" I felt as if everything had just gone sideways ninety degrees. "What do you mean, he didn't? Are you saying that's not what happened, or that it did happen only it was really someone else and you thought it was Steve or—" I stopped, trying to figure it out.

"I mean, it wasn't Steve," she said.

I couldn't help feeling an enormous surge of relief and I realized that all along I'd been waiting to hear that there was some mistake, that Steve could not possibly have done this to Linda. "Who was it? One of the stalkers who came back or just some maniac—"

"It was Ted."

"Linda," I said as gently as I could. "Ted died. He killed himself. I know you remember that because you referred to it yourself tonight."

"I know," she said. "That was *why* he killed himself. So he could do this to me whenever he wanted." The bloodshot eye opened again, staring at me with the complete calm and sanity of either the safely rational or the hopelessly insane—it's the one expression that looks identical on both. "You never answered my question about your belief in the supernatural."

"I asked you to be specific and you weren't, so I didn't bring it up again," I said reasonably. "We can talk about it now if you want."

Her bruised lips stretched a little. "You think I'm nuttier than a fruitcake, don't you?"

I shook my head. "No. You're not crazy, Linda. I know that much." Yeah. *Right.*

"If I were sitting where you are right now, I'd think I was looking at this year's leading contender for Sugar Plum Queen of the Enchanted Forest."

"If you were sitting where I am, you'd know you were looking at someone who had just suffered a severe trauma—"

"Oh, *please, don't.* Anything but the severe trauma loophole. Do I look like someone in shock to you?"

"Yes," I said, really believing it now and finding it a relief as well.

"Well . . . thanks." She reached over and patted my knee clumsily. "I know you're trying to be kind to me. And I don't mean that in a nasty way."

"I know, Linda," I said, lightly. "You're not a nasty person. But I imagine you're a pretty tired person—"

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"Have you ever taken a punch, Cleo?" she went on as if I hadn't said anything. "Don't bother trying to answer, that's a rhetorical question because I know you never have. And I don't mean *that* in a nasty way, either. I mean, I'm not saying that you don't know as much as I do just because I've been a punching bag and you haven't."

"No, I didn't think you were," I said, and got up carefully to walk around and stretch out on my own bed. Maybe if she were lying there alone, she'd talk herself to sleep. "Go on, I'm listening."

She hesitated. "If you'd ever taken a punch, you'd know that it's not the sort of thing you want to repeat. Ever. It's not the sort of thing you ask for, or goad someone into doing to you. No matter how sick or neurotic you are, it's not something you need or want done to you. But it *is* something that some people need to *do*. To anyone who'll hold still for it."

I muted the volume on the TV but left the picture on.

"It took me a long time to understand that it wasn't me making Ted the way he was," Linda said, and her voice sounded very sad and resigned. "I know it must sound so stupid to someone like you but I *really did not understand* that Ted was violent because he was Ted, and not because I made his life hell."

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe it's a matter of luck more than anything that I didn't have to learn something like that the hard way. If things had been different, it could have been me rather than you."

"Sure. But if you'd gotten together with him, you'd have walked off and never looked back the first time he even *threatened* to hit you."

I smiled at the ceiling. "It's nice to think so," I said, "but we don't know that for sure. I might have done exactly the same as you. When you see someone you love hurting, in need of help—"

"Yeah, it's so normal to want to help someone who's going through a bad patch," Linda said, a bit dreamily. "Then one day you wake up and discover the bad patch has spread over a few years and it doesn't look like it's going to get any better."

I started to say something but she went on and I let her.

"It starts small, the hitting. Did you know that? I mean, there are guys who apparently go all out right away, but with most guys, it starts small. I learned that in the first women's shelter I went to. Almost all the women there had a story very similar to mine. First it was threats, nothing specifically alarming, just shit like 'I'm gonna kick your ass' or that old favorite, 'One of these days, Alice, bang! Zoom! To the moon!' That one's funny, so it's okay to say it, it's a joke. Then after awhile it's just 'Answer me or I'll let you have it,' and there's nothing funny about it. I started wondering if maybe all the guys were getting together while the women were asleep and getting the same dialog from somewhere, because even when it wasn't the same, it was similar enough to be spooky." Pause.

"Maybe it's not just dialog," she said after a bit, "maybe it's a whole script or something, because the things they would do would be similar. First it would be grabbing your arm. To get your attention. Or to keep you from walking out of the room, if that was your thing. That was *my* thing. It used to drive Ted crazy, that I'd walk out of the room. But I needed to. I needed to go to some other place and get a grip, you know, cool down, pull myself together. Ted saw it as the ultimate act of defiance, daring to leave his presence. 'You get back in here in ten seconds or I'm coming up there and I'll drag you back by your hair.' I think between all of us women in that shelter,

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we'd lost enough hair to make a whole line of hairpieces for a beauty salon. You could call it Neanderthal Chic: the ultimate accessory for clubbing at home. Ha, ha."

"Go on," I said. "I'm still listening."

"Then it's grabbing and shaking. One hand, then two hands. You try to get away. That's when they start smacking you to get your attention. First it's with the open hand. Then the open hand closes. One day, Ted picked up a fly swatter and started whaling away on me with it. And you know what—I just started laughing. I couldn't help it, I just started laughing and laughing because him hitting me with a fly swatter hurt so much *less* than him pounding on me with his bare hands. I was, as you might imagine, hysterical.

"Not just because he was hitting me, but because this was what our special love had come to. In the beginning, it *had* been so special. Everywhere we went together—and we were never apart—it was like we had this huge sign over us: LINDA AND TED, SOUL MATES: TAKE A GOOD LOOK, FOLKS, THIS IS WHAT LOVE REALLY IS. His friends would tell me how great I was; my friends would tell him he was a miracle. Eighteen months later, he was beating me with a fly-swatter and I was laughing hysterically because this was what love really was, and it was all my fault."

"You don't believe that any more though," I said. "Do you?"

"No, I don't. I've backslid on a number of things, but that isn't one of them. Like I said, it took me a long time to understand that I was a handy excuse for Ted's violence, but I wasn't the cause." She sighed sleepily and I hoped she might drift off. "I was glad that I'd managed to get that through my thick head before he committed suicide," she continued after a bit. "Because I talked to him the night before he did it, and I told him. I told him that his violence was a problem he had to solve on his own, that I knew I wasn't the cause so I wasn't going to shoulder the blame any more. I wasn't going to be his victim any more. I was free of him."

"Mmm," I said, frowning a little. My eyes were closed now but I was alert. Alert enough anyway to hear every word Linda said.

"If I hadn't managed to learn that lesson, I might have thought I was the cause of his suicide," she said. "His family thought so." She made a hoarse noise that might have been a laugh. "The thing is, though, they were right. I was wrong. I *am* responsible for Ted's suicide. I *am* the cause. Though not quite in the way that anyone would think."

Now, at this point I think I would have to say that I was actually more asleep than awake. But I wasn't totally *un*conscious at that point, either. I could hear Linda quite clearly and I could sense the various changes of light from the muted television flickering against my closed eyelids. I could feel how I was lying on top of the bedspread, sort of diagonally with my legs in a sloppy figure-four. But I could not raise enough energy or initiative to open my mouth and ask Linda what the hell she meant by that last statement. Maybe she expected me to; maybe she was relieved when I didn't.

"You never did answer me when I asked you if you believed in the supernatural," she said. "Or maybe I didn't make it clear what kind of supernatural I was referring to. Yeah, now I remember, because you asked me if I meant astrology or angels or ghosts." She laughed a little. "Ghosts, Cleo. Ghosts would be it. The survival of the soul, or the will, after death." Another laugh. "Hey, I guess that would be stalking after death. Sounds crazy. Undead stalkers. That's got the feeling of something terribly sexy, pop-cul-

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turally speaking, good for a million cheesy movies. Not to mention videogames. Wish I could say I was a genius but it's simply the story of my life."

I could hear her shifting position effortfully. "That was why Ted committed suicide, so he could continue to stalk me for as long as he wanted, so that I couldn't stop being his victim. And to remind me that my own death would offer no escape, either, that he would be waiting for me after *I* died, because Ted is heavily into the intimidation aspect. I'm a walking textbook on the psychology of violence, have you noticed that? And the amazing thing is that the supernatural psychology of violence is identical to regular unleaded. So to speak.

"Of course, I owe all my education in this area to Ted. The short time—relatively short time—we spent together taught me a lot of what I know about abuse, abusers, and abusive relationships. And I have all eternity to learn about the supernatural dimension, which Ted has also taught me about, and will continue to, unless I can figure out how to avoid getting a degree in eternal torment.

"I can't see if you're laughing at me, or just looking dismayed. One too many blows to the head, poor Linda, we knew her well. Once a promising career woman, now another of Muhammad Ali's fellow travelers on the punchy side of the street. Except the Champ has a good retirement package, a loving spouse to look after him, and isn't spinning wild delusional tales about the ghost of Sonny Liston.

"Anyway, it's okay, whatever your reaction is. I wouldn't believe it myself if I were you. Hell, I wouldn't believe it myself if *I* were me—and I am, come to think of it, how about that—if someone else came to me and told me the reason I keep getting beaten up by men I get involved with and stalked by men I don't even know is because the malevolent spirit of the late Theodore Castle is haunting me.

"So I guess that leads us to the question of what turned me into a believer. And the answer is, again, Ted himself. Good old Ted, always ready with a learning curve. Not that that was his intention. He was just bragging by way of intimidating me. Killing two Lindas with one stone, like.

"He mailed me a letter, just before he died, or had it mailed. It showed up on the day of his funeral. I didn't go, of course.

"As soon as I opened it, I knew it was from him. His handwriting was unmistakable. It was so weird, it was the closest thing to a suicide note, but at the same time, it really wasn't. He opened asking how I was and he assumed I wouldn't be at his funeral so he would describe the service for me, how he thought it would probably go, his mother being in charge of the arrangements and all. And then he said that he wasn't really so much dead as he was free and he'd be seeing a lot more of me now. I'd be seeing him, too, but I wouldn't know right away it was him. There was a lot of stuff about certain rituals and sacrifices and how it was worth it because you could continue for as long as you wanted, the only price being the delay in entering the afterlife. And since there was no law saying you *had* to enter the afterlife ever, he could hang around and make sure I kept on suffering. But best of all, he would be waiting for me when I died. He would catch me as I came out of the world of the living and then I'd *really* learn the meaning of eternal torment."

She was silent for so long after that that I was sure she had fallen asleep, and I thought seriously about getting up, shutting off the TV and all the

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lights, and getting some rest. But before I could move, she was talking again.

"I figured it was just his way of getting one last kick in before he checked out. Maybe he had his mother mail it to me without telling her what it was or something, I don't know. I didn't tell anyone about it, not the police, not anyone at the women's shelter, not Ronny—Ronny and I were living together by then and I didn't want to upset him. Threats from beyond the grave. He'd have called the police and demanded they question Ted's family and I figured we'd all suffered enough over Ted, even his family. When you got down to it, really, who could blame them for not wanting to believe that he was a brute and a bully and a batterer? I'd known him when he was really nice, too. So I burned the letter in the kitchen sink, washed the ashes into the garbage disposal, and said good-bye to old terrors for the last time. I thought.

"Looking back, I can see he must have been biding his time. I couldn't tell you exactly when he took over from Ronny, or whatever you'd call it. But it must have been fun for him, masquerading as Ronny and fooling me completely, simply by taking advantage of the fact that I was—to be frank—pretty wrapped up in my own thoughts. All I noticed was, Ronny seemed a lot tenser than usual in the few days before my birthday. I figured it was work—he was in advertising and the pressure was unbelievable sometimes. Ronny had always managed to maintain a pretty sunny disposition and a relaxed attitude. So I figured things must have been astoundingly pressured. He would snap at me from time to time, or sit by himself in a far corner of the living room with the newspaper up around him. Or he'd fall asleep in front of the TV on the couch late at night and never wake up to come to bed.

"But on my birthday, everything seemed fine. It was a Saturday, so he didn't have to work. He bought a cake from a French bakery, put the candles on, lit them, presented it to me in the dining room. 'Make a wish and blow out your candles,' he said. So I wished that everything could stay as wonderful as it was right now, and I blew out the candles. Wouldn't you know it, one stayed lit.

"'You missed one,' he said, 'let me help you.' He put his hand on the back of my neck and I thought he was going to help me blow out that last one. But he didn't. Instead, he pushed me face-first into the cake—*hard*. And I thought, Oh, jeez, this is supposed to be funny, he doesn't know he hurt me. Because he had, he'd banged my head on the dish underneath hard enough to break it and scratch the table. Then I heard the way he was laughing and I knew that it wasn't supposed to be funny to me, just for him.

"I twisted away from him and tried to find my way out of the room, out of the house, and there was all this cake and frosting stinging my eyes—there's *really* nothing funny about getting a cake in the face—and Ronny was following along behind me, giving me a shove now and again and making these mean, stupid jokes like, 'What's the matter, can't face another birthday?' and 'Another year looks good on you,' shit like that. While I was crying like a fool.

"I'd have sworn that every house on the block heard us—the weather was good, we had the windows open and people were out working in their yards or playing with their kids. In fact, I'm sure everyone *did* hear us. But you know the story—nobody wants to get involved in someone else's marital problems. Even if the people aren't formally married. It's a domestic dis-

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pute, you don't poke your nose into somebody else's domestic dispute. So nobody interfered while Ronny beat me half to death."

For some reason, I was sure she was looking at me now—I'd heard her shift position again—so I nodded. Or I thought I did.

"That's not an exaggeration, you know. I almost did die. By the time I was able to drag myself to a telephone and call myself an ambulance, one lung had already collapsed and the other was about to. I dragged myself to the open front door—where Ronny had gone, I didn't know—and just lay there thinking that I just wanted to survive this beating long enough to tell them who had done it.

"I fell into this strange, dreamy state, like what I've always thought a coma must be like. It seemed like I could hear everything going on around me but it was all very far away, and mixed in with stuff that the people around me couldn't hear. Voices of people who were like me, on the border between life and death, and others who had . . . made the choice not to wake up. One of them seemed to be urgently assuring me that it really *was* up to me, I could make the decision if I wanted to, I could choose to go back, or not.

"Believe me, I wanted *not.* Ronny had beaten me up. As far as I was concerned, if a person like Ronny could turn violent, then there was nothing left to live for. The world was a pile of shit and I didn't want any part of it.

"And then I heard Ted. I heard him just as clear as if he'd been bending down beside me and talking into my ear. Yeah, he was saying, it sure *is* a shitty old world, so why don't you just die, Lindy? Just give up the old ghost, shuffle off the mortal coil and call it a day, huh?

"And I could hear *thousands* of other voices, a lot of them speaking in unison, warning me not to, telling me to hold on and stay alive, get *away* from him before he *got* me.

"Things get pretty fuzzy after that. I woke up in the hospital with Betty Felder holding my hand, and a message from you and Dez and a few other people. And I knew, deep down in my gut, in my bones and sinews, that Ronny hadn't beaten me up, Ted had, and Ronny was dead.

"I didn't tell anyone, of course. It wasn't really that I was afraid it would have looked bad when they found him, which they did after a couple of days. I did have an alibi—I couldn't have moved out of my hospital bed to swat a fly. But it sure would have seemed *odd,* me being so certain he was dead. The police ruled it a drunk-driving accident—good thing he went head on into a tree instead of another car, Betty said. But I knew it was a suicide, and I'd be running into Ted again. Because that was the only way he could switch from one body to another. Once he'd taken one over, he was stuck in it until it died. I learned that while I was hovering between life and death. Don't ask me how. Nothing works the same there as here. I knew I'd have to be very careful.

"Of course, after a while, you start wanting normal more than careful. You start resenting the way you have to jump at shadows and look over your shoulder all the time and behave like someone watching for evil replicant aliens who look just like human beings.

"I felt like a prize loony, watching for an ambush by a dead man wearing a live person's body. So I gave myself some therapy. I worked on convincing myself that everything I'd supposedly learned during my supposed near-death experience was just a vivid paranoid dream brought about by the trauma of the beating and the drugs they'd given me.

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"Then I had to put it to the test." She gave a long sigh, neither tired nor unhappy. "I bet you're asleep now, Cleo. Maybe not totally, but partly. Awake enough that if I asked you right out if you were asleep, you'd be able to deny it. But you really are. It's okay, I don't mind. You're listening. I don't mind if you listen awake or asleep." She gave a soft laugh. "Be comfy, huh?"

Maybe I twitched.

"There was this accountant who worked in the same building downtown that I did. After I got out of the hospital, I moved and changed jobs. In spite of everyone telling me I should be all right, I said I had to change everything. But that was before my self-imposed therapy. Anyway, I used to see this accountant in the elevator when I went in every morning, and usually at lunchtime. We'd smile, exchange a few words. I'd think, 'Jeez, an accountant. How boring. I hope.'" She laughed. "I didn't know whether he liked me or not, whether he was interested or not, but I figured what the hell. You can spend the rest of your life cowering in a bunker, or you can come out into the light with the rest of the humans. So one day, I asked him out. Just like that. You want to go for a drink sometime after work?

"From the look on his face, I could tell I'd taken him completely by surprise. For all I know, maybe it was the first time a woman had ever asked him out. Then he looked pleased and said sure. We made a date, we met in the bar at the top of the Hyatt across the street and spent a couple of hours nursing happy hour specials, talking about nothing and watching the city rotate slowly in front of us. When we got up to go, I was telling myself, 'See? Isn't this more fun than paranoid delusions? Less stressful, too.'

"The accountant asked if he could give me a ride home and I told him not this time, thanks, see you tomorrow. He looked a bit disappointed at first but nothing alarming. I didn't wonder if he'd ask me out sometime, or if I'd ask him again or anything. I was just high on the fact that I had proved once and for all that life was not a minefield, that I was not some kind of dead brute's target and that I was still capable of normal behavior, in spite of all the *ab*normal behavior I'd had to put up with."

She was silent for a long time again but I knew she hadn't fallen asleep; I could tell by her breathing. "He came up behind me as I was unlocking my apartment door. I thought for sure that no one would be able to miss that there was an assault going on in my apartment and at least one person would either investigate, call the police, or both.

"Well, I was only partly right. After a while—it felt like forever, but it was probably just a little while—there was this nervous little tap at the door and I heard a voice say, 'Excuse me in there, could you guys keep it down? You woke my baby.'

"*'Call the police!'* I screamed just before the accountant gave me a punch in the head. He dragged me into the bedroom and tied me up with extension cords—hog-tied me, just like you see in certain kinds of magazines. Or the rodeo. Then he leaned down close and said, 'You know, I like this better, Lindy—you alive, me dead. I like surprising you like this. Catch you later, babe.'

"I think the word *bugfuck* is a good way to describe my state of mind. I lost my voice screaming. They had to sedate me. I was sure that one of the cops was Ted, of course, that they'd find the accountant had jumped off the roof or something. But it was the weirdest thing—they caught him. They actually managed to catch him. The person who had asked us to keep it down had called the police and then watched my door, followed him out to his car

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and took his license plate number. They had him within the hour. And then things *really* got . . . abnormal.

"It never occurred to me that anyone would question the situation—a woman is attacked and beaten by a man after declining a ride home with him. I forgot who I was, however. The cops knew me, the hospital knew me, Betty Felder knew me, Ted's family knew me, Ronny's friends knew me, my own friends knew me. And every single one of them were suspicious now, even the ones who hadn't been before. 'Hear about Linda?' 'Linda? Oh, no, not again.' 'Yes, again, and this time, a guy she just met! Can you believe that?' 'You're kidding.' 'Oh, no. And it turns out that *he* claims it was consensual rough sex and she just freaked out because someone else in the building complained about the noise.' 'Wow.' "

She sighed. "Wow. Exactly what I would have said myself. That's the hell of it. Wow. The accountant had no criminal record whatsoever, of course, and ten thousand great character references. While I had a track record of broken bones, black eyes, bruises, subdural hematomas—

"Betty Felder stood by me anyway, I have to give her that. She stood by me the whole way and she never once said *anything.* But one of the other volunteers from the shelter who came with her to visit one day waited until Betty was out of the room and then suggested that maybe I should go into therapy to learn how not to get people so mad at me.

"It never got to trial. The accountant pleaded guilty to a charge of disturbing the peace. He had quite a lawyer."

She shifted her body slowly, carefully. "Did you ever know about that? In detail, I mean. Or did that all happen when you were in Australia? Lucky you, Australia. I envied you something fierce, Cleo. Still do, only even more so.

"I had to look at the accountant every day in the elevator after I went back to work. I couldn't afford to quit and look for something else. He didn't so much as smirk at me. He didn't have to—everyone around him did it for him. I got good at looking at him without seeming to and after awhile, I could see Ted there quite clearly.

"That was probably the one time I actually managed to unnerve Ted. I didn't realize I would, of course, it was sheer torture for me. But then I began to see from his expression that my continued presence in the building, at the same job, riding the same damned elevator, was making him crazy. To Ted, I was acting as if I knew something he didn't and he thought that was impossible. The dead one was the one with all the facts, not the living one. As I say, I didn't realize. I was just surprised the day he didn't turn up and someone told me he'd transferred to a similar position in Washington State. I was pretty sure, however, that he'd actually gone underground—literally, if you see what I mean. I tried to find out but you know what? It's not that easy to find out if someone's dead, Internet be damned. Birth records aren't cross-referenced with death records, never have been, and it's too much work to start now. And forget asking anyone who knew him. It was obvious what they thought *I* was.

"So I couldn't decide what to do. Leave town myself? Stay right where I was, try to cultivate my neighbors, keep close to my friends so they'd see—what? That I wasn't the kind of girl who went in for consensual rough sex, that I never did anything that would make anyone want to beat me up, that I hadn't asked for any of this?

"Or had I? When I first went to the police about Ted, their whole reaction to it was basically, 'Hey, you slept with him, you whore, you deserve to die.'

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Funny, I thought that attitude was about half a century out of date—at least half a century—but apparently it's like the old song says, about how everything old is new again.

"While I was trying not to have a nervous breakdown, stalker number one appeared. Sold aluminum siding, drove around town in a panel truck. Of course I'd see him around a lot—his office was in town, his prospects were all homeowners in residential neighborhoods and suburbs. But I knew as soon as I saw him. He had Ted's evil grin. He'd blow kisses at me. Everywhere I went, I'd see that truck. Wouldn't always see *him,* so I was back to jumping at shadows. Finally, I phoned Betty Felder and told her I had a stalker.

"She was sure it was all in my head. She didn't say so, but I could tell. So I got a camera, a tiny one that would print the date and time on the film emulsion. I photographed him for a week and took the prints to Betty. She insisted that we go to the police with them right away. I didn't want to—I didn't know what I wanted to do—but she told me it was either that or pack up my photos and go home. I had to take direct, constructive action, not cower under the covers. So I went to the police with her holding my hand all the way.

"She let go of my hand when they said they already had a complaint on file from *him* about *me*—he had filed a report claiming that *I* was stalking *him,* following him around, taking his picture, scaring away not only his customers but also women he was trying to date."

She laughed again, but it wasn't a pretty sound. "If that wasn't my lowest point to date, it was a contender. He really had me that time. I was really on my own now. I was going to just lose it but then, I don't know, some last reserve of self-preservation I hadn't realized I had bubbled up and I started wiring myself for sound. Every day, all day, I walked around wired. It was just a little personal stereo, except it was the kind that could record as well as playback. It just looked like I was always plugged into some music or something, but I was actually just waiting for him to talk to me. I knew he'd have to talk to me, especially if I didn't seem sufficiently terrorized.

"It took two months, but he finally broke down and cornered me in the supermarket and he talked to me as Ted, making threats, mocking me. And I played along but I kept saying very, very neutral things like 'Please don't,' and 'What do you want?' and 'I didn't do anything' and, Ted's personal all-time favorite, 'Please, you're scaring me!'

"I took the tape to the police. They made me wait something like five hours to see an officer, but I hung in there, reading a book, ignoring the way they were sneaking glances at me and whispering about me. And for once, I got lucky—the investigating officer I drew was a woman and she didn't buy any of that what-did-she-do-to-piss-him-off crap. Even better, the store security camera backed me up, and so did one of the stockboys, who had been just around the other side of the canned goods section, shaking in his shoes, thinking someone was going to be murdered right in the store on his shift.

"They put out a restraining order. Betty Felder told me later that they strongly suggested that the guy would be happier in another part of the country. Everyone was so ashamed, she told me. My case officer was going so far as to say that loose lips had probably leaked my previous problems into the public, where this sicko heard them, or overheard them, and decided I sounded like a good time.

"I'm afraid I wasn't very warm to Betty. I was already watching for the

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next one. The software engineer. I'd changed jobs and moved again, but he found me. Because he was Ted and he'd always find me. I phoned Betty and told her that it was obvious the aluminum siding salesman had had some like-minded friends. I didn't even have to go down to the station for that one. The same case officer came out and took a statement, and told me that they were placing a patrol car in my vicinity until further notice. Anyone with similar ideas would see that the police took protecting me very seriously, and it would discourage other crackpots from working out their particular life-plan on me. I could have kissed her.

"But you can see it coming, can't you? Maybe I did see it coming and decided it was too . . . I don't know. Maybe I thought Ted was too scared of the police. It turned out that the police were ideal, particularly in this situation. I felt like I was staggering under the load again, especially since it took me a while to notice. I asked my case officer to stop the surveillance, since the stalking seemed to have stopped. She said okay, but they'd keep driving by. Great. Now he had permission.

"Along about then, Steve turned up." She blew out a disgusted breath. "Which is close to where you came in. Working with you guys, it was just nice, you know? Really, really nice. Normal. Even with a cop following me around. See, that was the catch Ted hadn't thought of—he'd have to be that cop for a while. He couldn't commit suicide to commandeer another body without making me look victimized. The idea was to make *me* look like a psycho and everyone else I accused look victimized. As long as he was the cop, he had to do as he was told, follow orders, really be a good policeman, or forfeit his privilege of stalking me. But most important of all, he couldn't be anyone else.

"I should have known he'd just wait things out. He must have decided it would be so much better to let me slip into a sense of security. I don't know what happened. Maybe he staged an accident. I never could find out.

"That's the sacrifice, you see. Your own life, in trade. I learned it all in the near-death experience. But I told you about that, didn't I? Starting to repeat myself. But then, it's getting late, and I'm not going to be awake much longer, I don't think.

"Anyway, I decided while I was in the hospital getting my wounds dressed and my stitches stitched what I'm going to do. I have to have some choices here, he can't take everything from me. He *thinks* he can. He thinks he *has*. But that's because he's been underestimating me. He's terrorized me for so long in so many ways, he thinks I'm only good for . . . well, being terrorized. Consequently, he wouldn't believe I'd have the nerve, the absolute brass and steel *balls* to fight back.

"But I do. I got my nerve, my brass and steel balls, and I got nothing to lose, really. Although I have to say, I'm going to miss you, Cleo. I'm even going to miss Dez, little brat that she is. I really miss Steve, a lot. That's—well, I'll have to toughen up about that the way I have about everything else.

"You're almost snoring now, Cleo. I bet you won't remember most of this in the morning, and it's just as well. The less involvement you have, the better. I don't want him deciding he has to come after you, too.

"Me, I'm going to try a little experiment, something that Ted would never have done, for reasons that become obvious when you think about them. I don't actually know if it's possible. It might not be. But I'll let you know how it comes out. I'll find a way to tell you personally that my experiment worked. So now—"

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When I woke up, the sound was back up on the television. I was staring at the morning Perky Person whose name I couldn't remember, and listening to her explain how due to a mix-up, the mysterious Lynn or Linda actually hadn't left the hospital last night and had died of an allergic reaction to some medication, possibly penicillin. She hadn't been wearing a Medic-Alert tag. The missing person was actually a woman named Agnes Richards, who had been in a car accident that evening and had walked out before her family could come and get her. Her injuries had been severe but not life-threatening, though she was probably disoriented from pain medications, and that may have been why she wandered out. Anyone with any information should call this number.

They put up a photo of her. Sans facial injuries, she wasn't exactly Linda's twin, but she could have been her sister.

Then, of course, I had the sense to look around, but I already knew the room was empty.

I was moving into my new apartment when the man with the briefcase approached me. All things considered, I was not delighted to see a strange man approach, even though Linda's ghost story had been patently impossible. Still, you find yourself spooked by the damnedest things.

He asked if I were Cleo-not-Cleopatra-just-Cleo DiAndria.

"Who wants to know?" I said, resting a box of assorted junk against the side of the van I'd rented for the day.

"Jerry Thornton, attorney involved in the execution of Ms. Linda Doyle's will."

"Uh-huh," I said carefully, unsure whether I wanted to hear any more or whether I should just drop everything and run inside.

"If you're Cleo DiAndria, I have this for you." He held up a long white envelope with my name written on it in a familiar hand.

"That's me," I said, reaching for it.

He made me stop and show him my driver's license first before he handed it over.

I put the box down and opened the envelope. Inside were two tickets to a wrestling arena event in town next month, which had been sold out weeks before. How on earth had she managed to get them? Linda had never been interested in wrestling, as far as I knew.

I looked at the tickets again and something caught my eye—the word *Ringside.*

Somehow Linda had gotten *ringside* tickets to a sold-out wrestling event and left them to me in her will? I looked inside the envelop for some note or explanation, but there was just a slip of paper with *Enjoy!* written on it in Linda's handwriting.

"Something nice, I hope?" said Jerry Thornton, polite but curious.

I looked up from the tickets and glared at him suspiciously. Then I burst into tears.

The only person I would have wanted to take with me to that event would have been Linda. The last person I wanted to take was Dez and I hadn't thought she'd have wanted to go anyway. But as it turned out there wasn't anybody else available and Dez *did* want to go. She'd felt bad about what had happened to Linda. The story I'd given her about my part in it was about how I'd never found her and had just driven around and around all

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night looking for her, never suspecting that they'd mixed the two women up. Adding to the tragedy was the fact that they'd never found Agnes What's-Her-Name.

Sitting ringside in the arena, I tried not to think of any of that, nor of anything that had happened that night. Linda's last message to me had been *Enjoy!* Bless her heart, I thought. That was just the sort of bloodied-but-unbowed kind of thing she'd do.

The hysteria in the arena was pretty contagious. After awhile, even Dez was on her feet cheering for this one or that one, talking about buying a T-shirt, of all things. I got a kick out of her. If Linda's legacy was to bring fun into the lives of little sour apples like Dez, I sure wasn't going to stomp on her parade.

Familiar music with a very heavy bass line started up and Dez turned to me with a wicked twinkle in her eye. "This is your favorite, isn't it? The big one?"

"Big Easy," I sighed, swaying to the beat and listening to the people around me singing something about being born on the bayou. I leaned over her to watch him swagger down the aisle, seven feet of perfect Cajun muscle (or close enough for jazz, the seven feet, the Cajun, and the perfect) and I didn't even have the sense to feel sheepish. He was so much more *perfect* in person.

"You're drooling," Dez accused me.

"I'll feel stupid about it later, thanks."

"No problem, I'm drooling, too."

He took his time, flinging his gorgeous dark hair around, giving high fives, stopping to kiss hands. Amazing, I thought, how they all know just how to work a crowd, how big to play it and how long—

When he reached us at ringside, God help me, he actually *stopped.* First, he looked at Dez (he *would,* I fumed silently) and ran a hand over her hair down her cheek to her chin.

"Ah," he said in the world's most exaggerated Cajun accent, "ma p'tite fille!"

I thought Dez would actually swoon.

Then he did something I would never have thought he'd do. "But thees the kin' Ah lak, someone wid a liddle *meat* on her, eh?" And while I stood there thunderstruck, he picked me up by my elbows as if I weighed five pounds less than nothing and raised me to eye-level.

"Cher, I have a *personal* message for you," he said, smiling at me. "This message is, Linda's experiment *worked.*"

The world tilted sideways like a carnival ride. I tried to answer but my voice had been canceled.

"You remember dat, cher—Linda's experiment *worked.*" Then he kissed me between the eyes before putting me down again and strutting the rest of the way to the ring.

The world tilted slowly back to its usual position. I could feel Dez shaking my arm and yelling in my ear along with about ten thousand other people, mostly envious females. Then Big Easy was in the ring, flexing his muscles. He caught my eye and winked at me.

"Oh, *God,*" Dez said, giving me a squeeze. "For a minute there, I thought you were gonna *die.*"

"Not tonight," I said. "Not tonight." ○

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EIGHT THINGS NOT TO DO OR SAY WHEN A MAD SCIENTIST MOVES INTO YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

"I'm right next door. Just holler if you need anything."

Let your cat out.

"Why are your glasses so thick?"

Go though his garbage looking for body parts.

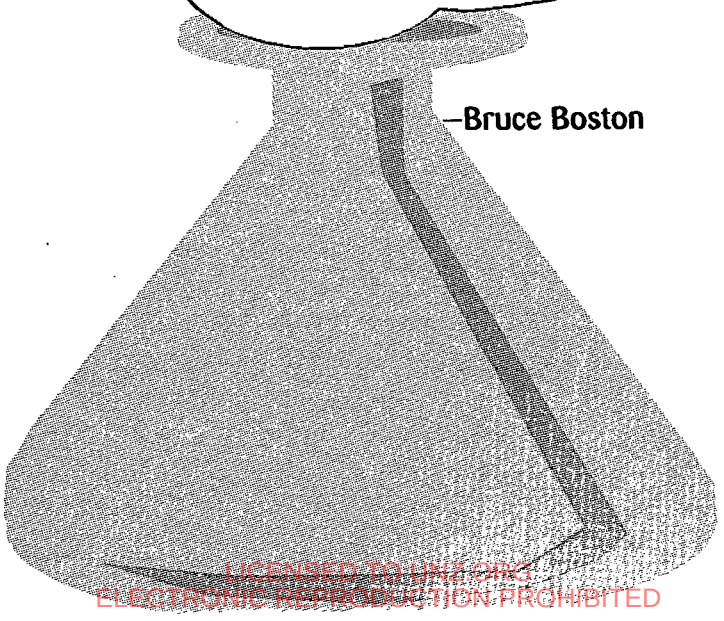
"Exactly what is it that you do for a living?"

Teach your children that the world is made up of many different kinds of people and we all have to learn to be tolerant and love one another.

"Did you hear that bloodcurdling scream last night?"

Invite him to a potluck.

—Bruce Boston



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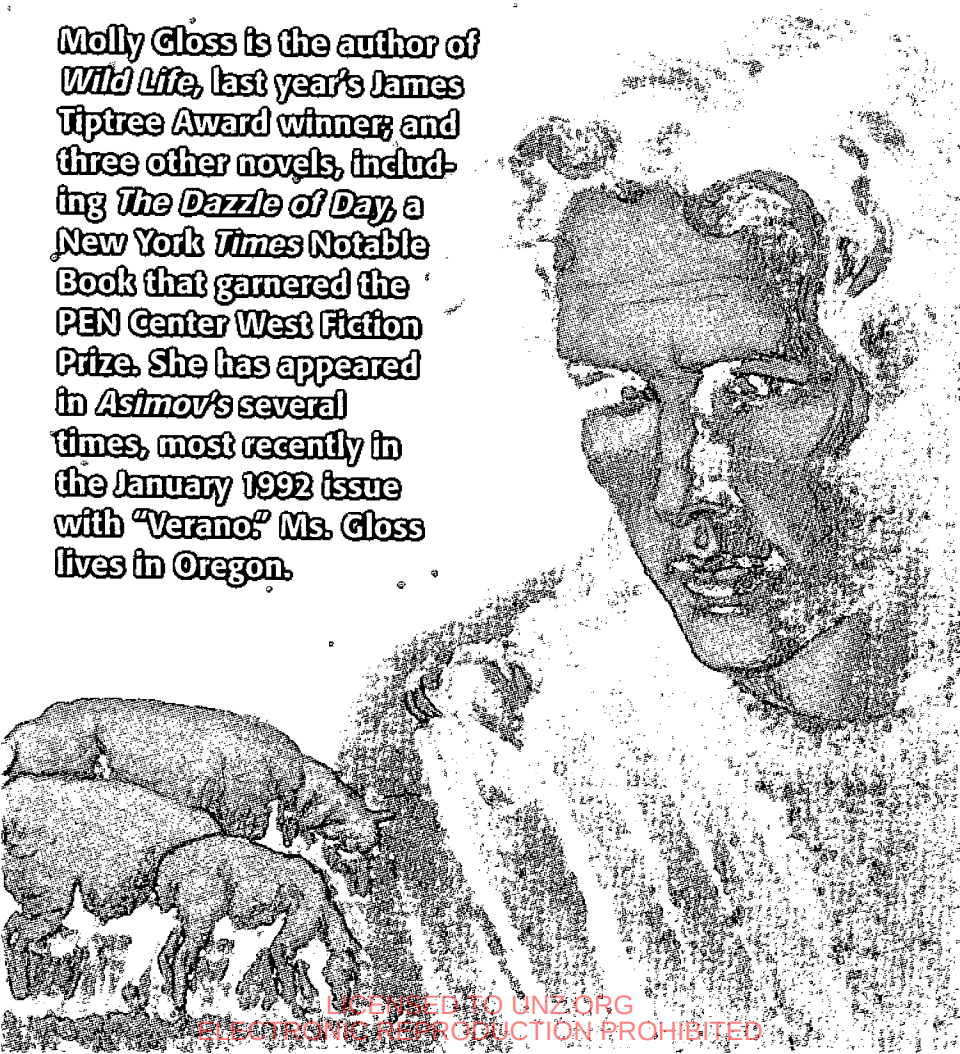
LAMBING SEASON

Molly Gloss

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Molly Gloss is the author of *Wild Life*, last year's James Tiptree Award winner; and three other novels, including *The Dazzle of Day*, a New York *Times* Notable Book that garnered the PEN Center West Fiction Prize. She has appeared in *Asimov's* several times, most recently in the January 1992 issue with "Verano." Ms. Gloss lives in Oregon.



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From May to September, Delia took the Churro sheep and two dogs and went up on Joe-Johns Mountain to live. She had that country pretty much to herself all summer. Ken Owen sent one of his Mexican hands up every other week with a load of groceries, but otherwise she was alone, alone with the sheep and the dogs. She liked the solitude. Liked the silence. Some sheepherders she knew talked a blue streak to the dogs, the rocks, the porcupines, they sang songs and played the radio, read their magazines out loud, but Delia let the silence settle into her, and, by early summer, she had begun to hear the ticking of the dry grasses as a language she could almost translate. The dogs were named Jesus and Alice. "Away to me, Jesus," she said when they were moving the sheep. "Go bye, Alice." From May to September these words spoken in command of the dogs were almost the only times she heard her own voice; that, and when the Mexican brought the groceries, a polite exchange in Spanish about the weather, the health of the dogs, the fecundity of the ewes.

The Churros were a very old breed. The O-Bar Ranch had a federal allotment up on the mountain, which was all rimrock and sparse grasses well suited to the Churros, who were fiercely protective of their lambs and had a long-stapled top coat that could take the weather. They did well on the thin grass of the mountain where other sheep would lose flesh and give up their lambs to the coyotes. The Mexican was an old man. He said he remembered Churros from his childhood in the Oaxaca highlands, the rams with their four horns, two curving up, two down. "Buen' carne," he told Delia. Uncommonly fine meat.

The wind blew out of the southwest in the early part of the season, a wind that smelled of juniper and sage and pollen; in the later months, it blew straight from the east, a dry wind smelling of dust and smoke, bringing down showers of parched leaves and seedheads of yarrow and bittercress. Thunderstorms came frequently out of the east, enormous cloudscapes with hearts of livid magenta and glaucous green. At those times, if she was camped on a ridge, she'd get out of her bed and walk downhill to find a draw where she could feel safer, but if she were camped in a low place, she would stay with the sheep while a war passed over their heads, spectacular jagged flares of lightning, skull-rumbling cannonades of thunder. It was maybe bred into the bones of Churros, a knowledge and a tolerance of mountain weather, for they shifted together and waited out the thunder with surprising composure; they stood forbearingly while rain beat down in hard blinding bursts.

Sheepherding was simple work, although Delia knew some herders who made it hard, dogging the sheep every minute, keeping them in a tight group, moving all the time. She let the sheep herd themselves, do what they wanted, make their own decisions. If the band began to separate, she would whistle or yell, and often the strays would turn around and rejoin the main group. Only if they were badly scattered did she send out the dogs. Mostly she just kept an eye on the sheep, made sure they got good feed, that the band didn't split, that they stayed in the boundaries of the O-Bar allotment. She studied the sheep for the language of their bodies, and tried to handle them just as close to their nature as possible. When she put out salt for them, she scattered it on rocks and stumps as if she were hiding Easter eggs, because she saw how they enjoyed the search.

The spring grass made their manure wet, so she kept the wool cut away from the ewes' tail area with a pair of sharp, short-bladed shears. She dosed

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the sheep with wormer, trimmed their feet, inspected their teeth, treated ewes for mastitis. She combed the burrs from the dogs' coats and inspected them for ticks. *You're such good dogs*, she told them with her hands. *I'm very very proud of you.*

She had some old binoculars, 7 x 32s, and in the long quiet days, she watched bands of wild horses miles off in the distance, ragged looking mares with dorsal stripes and black legs. She read the back issues of the local newspapers, looking in the obits for names she recognized. She read spine-broken paperback novels and played solitaire and scoured the ground for arrowheads and rocks she would later sell to rockhounds. She studied the parched brown grass, which was full of grasshoppers and beetles and crickets and ants. But most of her day was spent just walking. The sheep sometimes bedded quite a ways from her trailer and she had to get out to them before sunrise when the coyotes would make their kills. She was usually up by three or four and walking out to the sheep in darkness. Sometimes she returned to the camp for lunch, but always she was out with the sheep again until sundown, when the coyotes were likely to return, and then she walked home after dark to water and feed the dogs, eat supper, climb into bed.

In her first years on Joe-Johns, she had often walked three or four miles away from the band just to see what was over a hill, or to study the intricate architecture of a sheepherder's monument. Stacking up flat stones in the form of an obelisk was a common herders' pastime, their monuments all over that sheep country, and though Delia had never felt an impulse to start one herself, she admired the ones other people had built. She sometimes walked miles out of her way just to look at a rockpile up close.

She had a mental map of the allotment, divided into ten pastures. Every few days, when the sheep had moved on to a new pasture, she moved her camp. She towed the trailer with an old Dodge pickup, over the rocks and creekbeds, the sloughs and dry meadows, to the new place. For a while afterward, after the engine was shut off and while the heavy old body of the truck was settling onto its tires, she would be deaf, her head filled with a dull roaring white noise.

She had about eight hundred ewes, as well as their lambs, many of them twins or triplets. The ferocity of the Churro ewes in defending their offspring was sometimes a problem for the dogs, but in the balance of things, she knew that it kept her losses small. Many coyotes lived on Joe-Johns, and sometimes a cougar or bear would come up from the salt pan desert on the north side of the mountain, looking for better country to own. These animals considered the sheep to be fair game, which Delia understood to be their right; and also her right, hers and the dogs', to take the side of the sheep. Sheep were smarter than people commonly believed and the Churros smarter than other sheep she had tended, but by mid-summer the coyotes always passed the word among themselves, buen' carne, and Delia and the dogs then had a job to work, keeping the sheep out of harm's way.

She carried a .32 caliber Colt pistol in an old-fashioned holster worn on her belt. *If you're a coyot' you'd better be careful of this woman*, she said with her body, with the way she stood and the way she walked when she was wearing the pistol. That gun and holster had once belonged to her mother's mother, a woman who had come West on her own and homesteaded for a while, down in the Sprague River Canyon. Delia's grandmother had liked to tell the story: how a concerned neighbor, a bachelor with an interest in marriageable females, had pressed the gun upon her, back when the Klamaths were at war

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with the army of General Joel Palmer; and how she never had used it for anything but shooting rabbits.

In July, a coyote killed a lamb while Delia was camped no more than two hundred feet away from the bedded sheep. It was dusk, and she was sitting on the steps of the trailer reading a two-gun western, leaning close over the pages in the failing light, and the dogs were dozing at her feet. She heard the small sound, a strange high faint squeal she did not recognize and then did recognize, and she jumped up and fumbled for the gun, yelling at the coyote, at the dogs, her yell startling the entire band to its feet but the ewes making their charge too late, Delia firing too late, and none of it doing any good beyond a release of fear and anger.

A lion might well have taken the lamb entire; she had known of lion kills where the only evidence was blood on the grass and a dribble of entrails in the beam of a flashlight. But a coyote is small and will kill with a bite to the throat and then perhaps eat just the liver and heart, though a mother coyote will take all she can carry in her stomach, bolt it down and carry it home to her pups. Delia's grandmother's pistol had scared this one off before it could even take a bite, and the lamb was twitching and whole on the grass, bleeding only from its neck. The mother ewe stood over it, crying in a distraught and pitiful way, but there was nothing to be done, and, in a few minutes, the lamb was dead.

There wasn't much point in chasing after the coyote, and anyway, the whole band was now a skittish jumble of anxiety and confusion; it was hours before the mother ewe gave up her grieving, before Delia and the dogs had the band calm and bedded down again, almost midnight. By then, the dead lamb had stiffened on the ground, and she dragged it over by the truck and skinned it and let the dogs have the meat, which went against her nature, but was about the only way to keep the coyote from coming back for the carcass.

While the dogs worked on the lamb, she stood with both hands pressed to her tired back, looking out at the sheep, the mottled pattern of their whiteness almost opalescent across the black landscape, and the stars thick and bright above the faint outline of the rock ridges, stood there a moment before turning toward the trailer, toward bed, and afterward, she would think how the coyote and the sorrowing ewe and the dark of the July moon and the kink in her back, how all of that came together and was the reason that she was standing there watching the sky, was the reason that she saw the brief, brilliantly green flash in the southwest and then the sulfur yellow streak breaking across the night, southwest to due west on a descending arc onto Lame Man Bench. It was a broad bright ribbon, rainbow-wide, a cyanotic contrail. It was not a meteor, she had seen hundreds of meteors. She stood and looked at it.

Things to do with the sky, with distance, you could lose perspective, it was hard to judge even a lightning strike, whether it had touched down on a particular hill or the next hill or the valley between. So she knew this thing falling out of the sky might have come down miles to the west of Lame Man, not onto Lame Man at all, which was two miles away, at least two miles, and getting there would be all ridges and rocks, no way to cover the ground in the truck. She thought about it. She had moved camp earlier in the day, which was always troublesome work, and it had been a blistering hot day, and now the excitement with the coyote. She was very tired, the tiredness like a weight against her breastbone. She didn't know what this thing was, falling out of the sky. Maybe if she walked over there she would find just a

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dead satellite or a broken weather balloon and not dead or broken people. The contrail thinned slowly while she stood there looking at it, became a wide streak of yellowy cloud against the blackness, with the field of stars glimmering dimly behind it.

After a while, she went into the truck and got a water bottle and filled it, and also took the first aid kit out of the trailer and a couple of spare batteries for the flashlight and a handful of extra cartridges for the pistol, and stuffed these things into a backpack and looped her arms into the straps and started up the rise away from the dark camp, the bedded sheep. The dogs left off their gnawing of the dead lamb and trailed her anxiously, wanting to follow, or not wanting her to leave the sheep. "Stay by," she said to them sharply, and they went back and stood with the band and watched her go. *That coyot', he's done with us tonight:* This is what she told the dogs with her body, walking away, and she believed it was probably true.

Now that she'd decided to go, she walked fast. This was her sixth year on the mountain, and, by this time, she knew the country pretty well. She didn't use the flashlight. Without it, she became accustomed to the starlit darkness, able to see the stones and pick out a path. The air was cool, but full of the smell of heat rising off the rocks and the parched earth. She heard nothing but her own breathing and the gritting of her boots on the pebbly dirt. A little owl circled once in silence and then went off toward a line of cottonwood trees standing in black silhouette to the northeast.

Lamé Man Bench was a great upthrust block of basalt grown over with scraggly juniper forest. As she climbed among the trees, the smell of something like ozone or sulfur grew very strong, and the air became thick, burdened with dust. Threads of the yellow contrail hung in the limbs of the trees. She went on across the top of the bench and onto slabs of shelving rock that gave a view to the west. Down in the steep-sided draw below her there was a big wing-shaped piece of metal resting on the ground, which she at first thought had been torn from an airplane, but then realized was a whole thing, not broken, and she quit looking for the rest of the wreckage. She squatted down and looked at it. Yellow dust settled slowly out of the sky, pollinating her hair, her shoulders, the toes of her boots, faintly dulling the oily black shine of the wing, the thing shaped like a wing.

While she was squatting there looking down at it, something came out from the sloped underside of it, a coyote she thought at first, and then it wasn't a coyote but a dog built like a greyhound or a whippet, deep-chested, long legged, very light-boned and frail-looking. She waited for somebody else, a man, to crawl out after his dog, but nobody did. The dog squatted to pee and then moved off a short distance and sat on its haunches and considered things. Delia considered, too. She considered that the dog might have been sent up alone. The Russians had sent up a dog in their little sputnik, she remembered. She considered that a skinny almost hairless dog with frail bones would be dead in short order if left alone in this country. And she considered that there might be a man inside the wing, dead or too hurt to climb out. She thought how much trouble it would be, getting down this steep rock bluff in the darkness to rescue a useless dog and a dead man.

After a while, she stood and started picking her way into the draw. The dog by this time was smelling the ground, making a slow and careful circuit around the black wing. Delia kept expecting the dog to look up and bark, but it went on with its intent inspection of the ground as if it was stone deaf, as if Delia's boots making a racket on the loose gravel was not an an-

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nouncement that someone was coming down. She thought of the old Dodge truck, how it always left her ears ringing, and wondered if maybe it was the same with this dog and its wing-shaped sputnik, although the wing had fallen soundless across the sky.

When she had come about half way down the hill, she lost footing and slid down six or eight feet before she got her heels dug in and found a handful of willow scrub to hang onto. A glimpse of this movement—rocks sliding to the bottom, or the dust she raised—must have startled the dog, for it leaped backward suddenly and then reared up. They looked at each other in silence, Delia and the dog, Delia standing leaning into the steep slope a dozen yards above the bottom of the draw, and the dog standing next to the sputnik, standing all the way up on its hind legs like a bear or a man and no longer seeming to be a dog but a person with a long narrow muzzle and a narrow chest, turned-out knees, delicate dog-like feet. Its genitals were more cat-like than dog, a male set but very small and neat and contained. Dog's eyes, though, dark and small and shining below an anxious brow, so that she was reminded of Jesus and Alice, the way they had looked at her when she had left them alone with the sheep. She had years of acquaintance with dogs and she knew enough to look away, break off her stare. Also, after a moment, she remembered the old pistol and holster at her belt. In cowboy pictures, a man would unbuckle his gunbelt and let it down on the ground as a gesture of peaceful intent, but it seemed to her this might only bring attention to the gun, to the true intent of a gun, which is always killing. *This woman is nobody at all to be scared of,* she told the dog with her body, standing very still along the steep hillside, holding onto the scrub willow with her hands, looking vaguely to the left of him, where the smooth curve of the wing rose up and gathered a veneer of yellow dust.

The dog, the dog person, opened his jaws and yawned the way a dog will do to relieve nervousness, and then they were both silent and still for a minute. When finally he turned and stepped toward the wing, it was an unexpected, delicate movement, exactly the way a ballet dancer steps along on his toes, knees turned out, lifting his long thin legs; and then he dropped down on all-fours and seemed to become almost a dog again. He went back to his business of smelling the ground intently, though every little while he looked up to see if Delia was still standing along the rock slope. It was a steep place to stand. When her knees finally gave out, she sat down very carefully where she was, which didn't spook him. He had become used to her by then, and his brief, sliding glance just said, *That woman up there is nobody at all to be scared of.*

What he was after, or wanting to know, was a mystery to her. She kept expecting him to gather up rocks, like all those men who'd gone to the moon, but he only smelled the ground, making a wide slow circuit around the wing the way Alice always circled round the trailer every morning, nose down, reading the dirt like a book. And when he seemed satisfied with what he'd learned, he stood up again and looked back at Delia, a last look delivered across his shoulder before he dropped down and disappeared under the edge of the wing, a grave and inquiring look, the kind of look a dog or a man will give you before going off on his own business, a look that says, *You be okay if I go?* If he had been a dog, and if Delia had been close enough to do it, she'd have scratched the smooth head, felt the hard bone beneath, moved her hands around the soft ears. *Sure, okay, you go on now, Mr. Dog*: This is what she would have said with her hands. Then he crawled into the dark-

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ness under the slope of the wing, where she figured there must be a door, a hatch letting into the body of the machine, and after a while he flew off into the dark of the July moon.

In the weeks afterward, on nights when the moon had set or hadn't yet risen, she looked for the flash and streak of something breaking across the darkness out of the southwest. She saw him come and go to that draw on the west side of Lame Man Bench twice more in the first month. Both times, she left her grandmother's gun in the trailer and walked over there and sat in the dark on the rock slab above the draw and watched him for a couple of hours. He may have been waiting for her, or he knew her smell, because both times he reared up and looked at her just about as soon as she sat down. But then he went on with his business. *That woman is nobody to be scared of,* he said with his body, with the way he went on smelling the ground, widening his circle and widening it, sometimes taking a clod or a sprig into his mouth and tasting it, the way a mild-mannered dog will do when he's investigating something and not paying any attention to the person he's with.

Delia had about decided that the draw behind Lame Man Bench was one of his regular stops, like the ten campsites she used over and over again when she was herding on Joe-Johns Mountain; but after those three times in the first month, she didn't see him again.

At the end of September, she brought the sheep down to the O-Bar. After the lambs had been shipped out she took her band of dry ewes over onto the Nelson prairie for the fall, and in mid-November, when the snow had settled in, she brought them to the feed lots. That was all the work the ranch had for her until lambing season. Jesus and Alice belonged to the O-Bar. They stood in the yard and watched her go.

In town, she rented the same room as the year before, and, as before, spent most of a year's wages on getting drunk and standing other herders to rounds of drink. She gave up looking into the sky.

In March, she went back out to the ranch. In bitter weather, they built jugs and mothering-up pens, and trucked the pregnant ewes from Green, where they'd been feeding on wheat stubble. Some ewes lambed in the trailer on the way in, and after every haul, there was a surge of lambs born. Delia had the night shift, where she was paired with Roy Joyce, a fellow who raised sugar beets over in the valley and came out for the lambing season every year. In the black, freezing cold middle of the night, eight and ten ewes would be lambing at a time. Triplets, twins, big singles, a few quads, ewes with lambs born dead, ewes too sick or confused to mother. She and Roy would skin a dead lamb and feed the carcass to the ranch dogs and wrap the fleece around a bummer lamb, which was intended to fool the bereaved ewe into taking the orphan as her own, and sometimes it worked that way. All the mothering-up pens swiftly filled, and the jugs filled, and still some ewes with new lambs stood out in the cold field waiting for a room to open up.

You couldn't pull the stuck lambs with gloves on, you had to reach into the womb with your fingers to turn the lamb, or tie cord around the feet, or grasp the feet barehanded, so Delia's hands were always cold and wet, then cracked and bleeding. The ranch had brought in some old converted school buses to house the lambing crew, and she would fall into a bunk at daybreak and then not be able to sleep, shivering in the unheated bus with the gray daylight pouring in the windows and the endless daytime clamor out at the lambing sheds. All the lambers had sore throats, colds, nagging coughs. Roy Joyce looked like hell, deep bags as blue as bruises under his eyes, and Delia

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figured she looked about the same, though she hadn't seen a mirror, not even to draw a brush through her hair, since the start of the season.

By the end of the second week, only a handful of ewes hadn't lambed. The nights became quieter. The weather cleared, and the thin skiff of snow melted off the grass. On the dark of the moon, Delia was standing outside the mothering-up pens drinking coffee from a thermos. She put her head back and held the warmth of the coffee in her mouth a moment, and, as she was swallowing it down, lowering her chin, she caught the tail end of a green flash and a thin yellow line breaking across the sky, so far off anybody else would have thought it was a meteor, but it was bright, and dropping from southwest to due west, maybe right onto Lame Man Bench. She stood and looked at it. She was so very goddamned tired and had a sore throat that wouldn't clear, and she could barely get her fingers to fold around the thermos, they were so split and tender.

She told Roy she felt sick as a horse, and did he think he could handle things if she drove herself into town to the Urgent Care clinic, and she took one of the ranch trucks and drove up the road a short way and then turned onto the rutted track that went up to Joe-Johns.

The night was utterly clear and you could see things a long way off. She was still an hour's drive from the Churros' summer range when she began to see a yellow-orange glimmer behind the black ridgeline, a faint nimbus like the ones that marked distant range fires on summer nights.

She had to leave the truck at the bottom of the bench and climb up the last mile or so on foot, had to get a flashlight out of the glove box and try to find an uphill path with it because the fluttery reddish lightshow was finished by then, and a thick pall of smoke overcast the sky and blotted out the stars. Her eyes itched and burned, and tears ran from them, but the smoke calmed her sore throat. She went up slowly, breathing through her mouth.

The wing had burned a skid path through the scraggly junipers along the top of the bench and had come apart into about a hundred pieces. She wandered through the burnt trees and the scattered wreckage, shining her flashlight into the smoky darkness, not expecting to find what she was looking for, but there he was, lying apart from the scattered pieces of metal, out on the smooth slab rock at the edge of the draw. He was panting shallowly and his close coat of short brown hair was matted with blood. He lay in such a way that she immediately knew his back was broken. When he saw Delia coming up, his brow furrowed with worry. A sick or a wounded dog will bite, she knew that, but she squatted next to him. *It's just me*, she told him, by shining the light not in his face but in hers. Then she spoke to him. "Okay," she said. "I'm here now," without thinking too much about what the words meant, or whether they meant anything at all, and she didn't remember until afterward that he was very likely deaf anyway. He sighed and shifted his look from her to the middle distance, where she supposed he was focused on approaching death.

Near at hand, he didn't resemble a dog all that much, only in the long shape of his head, the folded-over ears, the round darkness of his eyes. He lay on the ground flat on his side like a dog that's been run over and is dying by the side of the road, but a man will lay like that too when he's dying. He had small-fingered nail-less hands where a dog would have had toes and front feet. Delia offered him a sip from her water bottle, but he didn't seem to want it, so she just sat with him quietly, holding one of his hands, which was smooth as lambskin against the cracked and roughened flesh of her

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palm. The batteries in the flashlight gave out, and sitting there in the cold darkness she found his head and stroked it, moving her sore fingers lightly over the bone of his skull, and around the soft ears, the loose jowls. Maybe it wasn't any particular comfort to him, but she was comforted by doing it. *Sure, okay, you can go on.*

She heard him sigh, and then sigh again, and each time wondered if it would turn out to be his death. She had used to wonder what a coyote, or especially a dog, would make of this doggish man, and now while she was listening, waiting to hear if he would breathe again, she began to wish she'd brought Alice or Jesus with her, though not out of that old curiosity. When her husband had died years before, at the very moment he took his last breath, the dog she'd had then had barked wildly and raced back and forth from the front to the rear door of the house as if he'd heard or seen something invisible to her. People said it was her husband's soul going out the door or his angel coming in. She didn't know what it was the dog had seen or heard or smelled, but she wished she knew. And now she wished she had a dog with her to bear witness.

She went on petting him even after he had died, after she was sure he was dead, went on petting him until his body was cool, and then she got up stiffly from the bloody ground and gathered rocks and piled them onto him, a couple of feet high, so that he wouldn't be found or dug up. She didn't know what to do about the wreckage, so she didn't do anything with it at all.

In May, when she brought the Churro sheep back to Joe-Johns Mountain, the pieces of the wrecked wing had already eroded, were small and smooth-edged like the bits of sea glass you find on a beach, and she figured that this must be what it was meant to do: to break apart into pieces too small for anybody to notice, and then to quickly wear away. But the stones she'd piled over his body seemed like the start of something, so she began the slow work of raising them higher into a sheepherder's monument. She gathered up all the smooth eroded bits of wing, too, and laid them in a series of widening circles around the base of the monument. She went on piling up stones through the summer and into September, until it reached fifteen feet. Mornings, standing with the sheep miles away, she would look for it through the binoculars and think about ways to raise it higher, and she would wonder what was buried under all the other monuments sheepherders had raised in that country. At night, she studied the sky, but nobody came for him.

In November, when she finished with the sheep and went into town, she asked around and found a guy who knew about star-gazing and telescopes. He loaned her some books and sent her to a certain pawnshop, and she gave most of a year's wages for a 14 x 75 telescope with a reflective lens. On clear, moonless nights, she met the astronomy guy out at the Little League baseball field, and she sat on a fold-up canvas stool with her eye against the telescope's finder while he told her what she was seeing: Jupiter's moons, the Pelican Nebula, the Andromeda Galaxy. The telescope had a tripod mount, and he showed her how to make a little jerry-built device so she could mount her old 7 x 32 binoculars on the tripod too. She used the binoculars for their wider view of star clusters and small constellations. She was indifferent to most discomforts, could sit quietly in one position for hours at a time, teeth rattling with the cold, staring into the immense vault of the sky until she became numb and stiff, barely able to stand and walk back home. Astronomy, she discovered, was a work of patience, but the sheep had taught her patience, or it was already in her nature before she ever took up with them. ○

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TARGET AUDIENCE

Lori Ann White

Originally from Idaho, Lori Ann White now lives in a fog bank near San Francisco with her husband and three cats. In addition to writing speculative fiction, she teaches kung fu, likes to play with hot glass, and watches too much television. She's currently hard at work on a historical fantasy novel set in southern China during the Boxer Rebellion.

It all started the morning Mr. Biscuit jabbed me in the nose with his cane.

I wasn't hurt; he was only a hologram. But he shocked the hell out of me. He'd come with the breakfast rolls, the first product I'd bought with a miniaturized holo-projector in the packaging. Technical marvels, next wave in advertising, yada yada. I just thought he was cute.

It was a Saturday, so both kids were sleeping in and I had only the Biscuit Man for company as I peeled rolls apart. He did his old soft-shoe routine on the counter, knocking his straw boater rakishly over one black button eye while singing the praises of the entire Mr. Biscuit line, from Powderpuff Lite biscuits through U-Bake croissants. Each time he finished he'd wink out and I'd have to bump the package to make him reappear. By the time I slid the rolls in the oven I was singing along.

As I wiped the counter I leaned down to examine him more closely. Quite realistic, for a hologram of a cartoon character. "Time to marvel at how flaky you are, right?" I said, and reached toward his little brown biscuit body, just like on the commercials. I couldn't feel anything, but the hologram stopped dancing, raised his tiny cane, assumed an en garde position, yelled, "Flake this," and lunged.

I backpedaled into the corner of the refrigerator. A handful of magnets clattered to the floor and several crayon masterpieces by my six-year-old, Teresa, fluttered after.

"Mom? You okay?" Bobby, my eleven-year-old, blinked at me from the doorway.

I blinked back. He looked so sweet, standing on the dirty linoleum in a pool of sunlight, his fine blond hair mussed from sleep, Raiders pajama top buttoned all wrong. I wanted to poke him in the belly, too, but figured I'd get the same response.

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"Yeah, I'm fine, sweetie," I said, making Bobby squirm. I straightened and grimaced at the catch in my back. "But that damned little hologram just tried to stab me."

"Oh, slick," said Bobby, making a beeline for the hologram, which had started up with the song and dance again.

"Be careful, Bobby."

"Geeze, Mom," he said, "no body count. It's just an ad."

I winced at the current euphemism for "no big deal" and tried to cover by massaging my shoulder. Bobby already thinks I'm out of the loop. "That 'ad' is vicious. I don't know what Westonbury Farms is thinking, sending out violent holograms."

Bobby assumed much the same position I'd been in and studied it. "Did you do something first?"

"I—uh—jabbed it, like in the commercials."

"Like this?" Bobby repeated my gesture, over a yelp of protest. Nothing happened.

I blinked again, feeling ever more foolish. Bobby reached behind and squeezed my arm. "Did you say anything?" he asked.

"Just something about seeing how flaky it was."

The hologram stopped dancing and jabbed at empty air. Bobby laughed. "It's one of the new ones," he said, and started chanting at the Biscuit, "Flake, flake, flake, flake." The hologram lashed about with the cane until I could almost hear it whistle through the air.

"Wait. What new ones? I didn't know there were old ones."

"Pick-up mikes in the projectors," said Bobby. "If you say the right word, they'll react. Flake, flake."

I pushed aside dirty dinner dishes to reach the tube, now split, in which the rolls had been packaged. The projector—and microphone, I guess—was a tiny lump under the paper label. Along with nutritional information and where to write for recipes was a notice in tiny type: *For a complete list of keywords and matching statements from our hologram, see our website.* "I think PAMV should know about this," I said. I figured Parents Against Media Violence would be very interested in a homicidal hologram.

"Aw, Mom, don't go all high school," Bobby moaned. "They're just ads."

"I don't care. Violence is violence. It's bad enough we still have to put up with pro sports." I carefully ripped the section of outer wrapper sporting the URL off the tube. "I want you to leave that thing alone."

"Mom—"

"No lip, young man. Go wake your sister up, and by the way, I believe it was your turn to do the dishes last night."

Bobby turned away, but before he did he looked at me. In that look was all the contempt of the young for the old, of the foolhardy for the wise, of hope for experience. But I knew what was at stake—I'm one sister shy because of a high school senior with a shotgun and a chip on his shoulder—and suddenly I could not bear having my caution ridiculed, not even by a well-loved boy who'd never heard his aunt's name.

"Don't give me that look. I'm the one who slaves every day at the clinic, letting sick people cough on me and doctors yell at me, all to keep a roof over your head, food on your plate, and ungodly expensive shoes on your feet."

"Yeah? Dad buys my shoes," he snapped as he stalked toward the door.

Shit.

Something in my silence caught Bobby's attention and he stopped, clear

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blue eyes fixed on mine. *Drop it, Bobby,* I thought, but he wasn't reading minds that morning. "Mom? Doesn't Dad buy my shoes?"

I don't volunteer information to my children about their louse of a father, but neither do I lie. I swallowed hard. "No. Not since your ninth birthday."

I saw tears well up before he turned away. "Dad doesn't pay for anything, does he?"

"No. No, he doesn't."

Bobby nodded. I watched him, breath stopped by the ache in my chest. I wanted to comfort him, but I could only help by taking back my words, and that was impossible.

He shrugged, still not looking at me. "No body count. I'll get Teresa."

When he was gone I collapsed into a kitchen chair. *No body count.* But I knew from experience that sometimes dying happens on the inside. "Don't worry about the dinner dishes," I called after him in a limp attempt at apology. "I'll wash them."

"Time for dessert?" piped Mr. Biscuit. "Meyers ice cream will hit the spot."

That night I called PAMV and discovered that they already knew about the hologram—one of Westonbury Farms' programmers had added the action to the Biscuit as a joke. Some joke. They fired her and recalled a few hundred thousand packages, but I decided to skip the holo-ads anyway. You can't be too careful where your kids are concerned.

My resolve did no good. Each day Bobby and Teresa were exposed to all of the snacks their friends brought from home. Sports figures, superheroes, cartoon characters, dancing and singing across their desks. Better than electronic pets.

The projectors started showing up in other places, too: holographic versions of toys ("All-Request Prissy Sing-Along," which had Teresa begging for weeks); warnings on prescription bottles; first-aid coaches on household cleansers. PAMV gave them its blessing, and even I started to wonder if I was just being stubborn.

The issue came to a head the night of Bobby's twelfth birthday. I got home from the clinic where I work as a receptionist to find the place an even bigger mess than usual: sneakers underfoot, dirty glasses on the coffee table, paper plates with the gooey remains of PB&J sandwiches on the floor. Bobby was having a sleep-over and two of his friends were already there. The boys were sprawled in front of the TV playing *Save the Rainforest* while Teresa watched from a nest of sweatshirts on the couch. I sighed. I try not to complain when he's playing his cooperative video games, and *Save the Rainforest* comes with PAMV's Seal of Approval.

"Hey, Mom." Bobby, intent on capturing a breeding pair of orangutans, didn't even look up. The other two boys rubbed their noses in the Mr. Biscuit salute. I sank onto the couch to watch him trek through Borneo and Teresa forsook her sweatshirts for my lap. She clings, but my boss Dr. Robichaux says it's just a phase.

Bobby whooped in triumph and Todd took over, stalking some kind of rhinoceros. My son scooted back until he could lean against the couch next to my legs. I felt absurdly touched—my son was sitting next to me, with his friends right in the same room. I wondered if I should press my luck by patting his head.

"Uh, Mom," said Bobby. "Birthday wish."

I snatched my hand back. He was only buttering me up for his one special

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yearly request, one that, by custom, I couldn't refuse—unless granting it would result in the end of life as we know it. At the very least.

I had a pretty good idea what he was going to ask. "Hit me."

"I just want you to quit being all parental about the holograms, that's all."

Teresa bounced on my lap. A birthday wish from Bobby that would benefit her as well was a rare thing indeed. "I *am* your parent."

"Uh, Mrs. K?"

"What, Todd?" I snapped.

Todd frowned at the screen, where his character was trying to tranquilize a rhino before he got trampled. "You gotta lighten up. Bobby needs a bottle of Sergeant Shine." Bobby shot an angry look at Todd, but said nothing.

"You're kidding."

Todd jumped and his little character squealed. The dart had gone astray. He shrugged and relinquished his spot at the joystick to Keith, who attacked it like he was back in the middle of one of the late, unlamented, first-person shooters.

"No, Mrs. K. We need it for Safety Day. Mrs. Spencer says Sergeant Shine has a deadly dialog on household poisons, and we need to talk to him to get a list of poisons and treatments. It's a contest."

I snorted. "Well, I'll just have to have a little talk with Mrs. Spencer—"

"Fine!" Bobby exploded. He sat up andpushed himself away from me. "Just fine. So how long until the rest of the kids decide I'm as big a loser as my parents?"

I stared at him in shock. Teresa whimpered. "What?"

Bobby slammed an "L" against his forehead with thumb and forefinger. "Loser. Loser. I've got a jerk and a control freak for parents, so what does that make me?"

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. "Bobby, that's ridiculous—"

"Yeah? Tell that to the kids who come to school with ads every freaking day."

I'd always tried to resist the "everybody else is doing it" whine, but I suddenly had one of those flashes of intuition that mothers dread. My baby was growing up, approaching the evil adolescent years where he needed to rebel against me but belong with his friends. The lack of such a simple thing as the holos was marking him as an oddity.

I shrugged, defeated. "All right. I guess they're only holograms, after all."

Holo-ads are triggered by movement; pick up a box and shake it, and voila! The dancing rabbit appears. Kids think this is great. They grab random packages and cart 'em around the stores, shaking them like mariachis. Boxes get crushed, jars dropped and smashed. In response, Save-Mart set aside a preview room for its holographic products.

I stopped there first, both kids in tow. Within seconds a pile of boxes and jars lay spread out around Teresa and a mob of ads all danced to their own tunes in a weird chorus line. Bobby gave a bottle of some evil green sports drink a good sloshing and a tiny, sweaty guy in shorts and a pullover appeared. I vaguely recalled him as some sort of soccer star, and when I got closer I could see him dribbling a little white ball with his feet while Bobby asked for tips.

I circled the room, pulling a box off a shelf and giving it a shake, prodding a bottle with a finger, overwhelmed by the variety. I was surrounded by not

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only the characters the kids liked, but several baby boomer favorites brought to life as well: Cap'n Crunch, Tony the Tiger, Mrs. Olsen the Coffee Lady, not to mention the Biscuit Man himself. They'd been around when I was a kid—not as major ad campaigns, but they were familiar enough I considered them old friends—and I started to relax.

"Flake," I said to Mr. Biscuit. Nothing happened. I ho-ho-hoed with the big green guy, chucked the bird under his beak, made promises to the rabbit that I would never keep. Raisins danced, weiners sang. Tiny bubbles dared kamikaze scrubbing missions through dirty sinks. A funny little bald guy furtively squeezed a roll of toilet paper.

They sang, shouted, laughed, danced, chanted slogans. *Buy me, buy me.* I should have been repelled; instead, I was charmed. Thus seduced into the proper mood, I collected my kids and went shopping.

Teresa and Bobby tried to take over the selection process, and I spent half my time pulling packages out of their hands and putting them back. In the end, I bought what I usually do, with a few exceptions: sugary cereal, cookies, chips. And Bobby's Sergeant Shine.

I pulled a spray bottle of tile cleaner off the shelf and Sergeant Shine appeared like the genie of hygiene. "Will this do, or do you need some of the all-purpose stuff?"

Bobby stared at the holo.

"Bobby?" I nudged him. Teresa was squeezed into the cart's bread shelf, her legs sticking out through the holes in the back, and she kept kicking me in the knees. I was losing patience.

"Any of them, Mom," he finally said. He still hadn't taken his eyes off the sergeant. "They're all the same."

"Okay." I tossed it into the basket. The holo danced above it. "Why couldn't Mrs. Spencer just bring one in?"

Bobby looked up at me then. His face was pale, his eyes thoughtful. "It's a question-and-answer holo. We're having a contest to see who can get the most complete list of poisons and treatments, so we each need one."

"You're interrogating Sergeant Shine," I said. "What do you get if you win? A date with him? I'd go for that if he'd do the bathroom."

Bobby's face went white. He swallowed. "Can I wait in the car?"

"Well, uh—sure, honey." I fished for the keys with one hand and checked his forehead with the other. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. It's just junk crash, I think."

I could understand that—his whole birthday weekend had been nothing but sweets and fast food—but I didn't believe it. He snatched the keys and sprinted down the aisle.

I stared down at the latest hitchhiker in the cart. "You just scared the hell out of my son."

"Scary? What's scary?" Teresa said worriedly. She peered over her shoulder, trying to see into the cart.

"Bobby thinks this is scary," I said, retrieving the spray bottle and sloshing it in front of her. The hologram came with it.

"Atten-SHINE," the sergeant bellowed, in a surprisingly deep voice for a hologram, and I finally took a good look at him.

I'll tell anyone who asks—my marriage was a big mistake. When my sister Penny was killed life seemed pretty worthless, a situation that didn't change until the kids came along. Even so, a biker is not the smartest choice for a husband.

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Trade the olive drab for a black leather vest, toss in a few tattoos and a blond handlebar mustache, and there was Rob, down to the deep voice and false bonhomie.

I quickly finished my shopping and had to fight not to break into a run as I pushed the cart through the parking lot. Bobby was staring out the window as I rolled up. When he saw me he swiped at his nose with a shirtsleeve and turned away. He'd been crying.

I wished I could throw that damned bottle away, but Bobby needed it for class. Besides, Sergeant Shine was just a hologram. What upset Bobby was his father. Or lack of one.

Time to face facts—there really was guy stuff a boy couldn't share with his mom. Bobby needed a man in his life—to learn from, to confide in. I was no help. There were guys I liked, but none who were good enough for my kids. If only I'd thought of that before I *had* kids.

Had Rob ever been good enough for my kids? No. Not that he'd tried. He lived fifteen minutes away with some bimbo named Ashley and he hadn't called Bobby in years.

I'd thought of checking with that Big Brother organization but always put it off, as afraid of getting a jerk from them as I was of finding another one myself. I could put it off no longer. I called in a few favors and left work early so I could make the call in the relative privacy of home.

I opened the apartment door to blissful quiet broken only by Bobby's soft hello and the faint strains of a radio from Teresa's room. I tossed my jacket over the back of the old bentwood rocker, gazing about in awe. The place looked spotless. Well, relatively spotless; there were quite a few old spaghetti stains on the couch that would never come out. But all the books and toys were put away, the TV stand dusted, the carpet vacuumed.

Bobby smiled shyly at me from the middle of a pile of schoolbooks. "Hi, Mom."

I swept my arm across the room. "Did you do this?"

"Well, yeah." He shifted a bit in his chair. "Why—did I miss something?"

"No. No, honey, this is marvelous." Tears stung and I blinked them back. I had to clear my throat before I could speak again. "What's the special occasion?"

"No special occasion. You work hard, is all."

All I could do was smile like an imbecile. Such a wonderful gift from a boy I usually tripped over as I walked in the door because he was flat on his belly in front of the TV. Maybe he wasn't in such bad shape. Maybe he could grow up okay without a man. My resolve to call Big Brothers evaporated.

"I did the bathroom and the kitchen, too."

I said the first Mom-words that popped into my head. "Oh, honey, you have to be careful with those cleansers—they can be dangerous—"

"It's okay. I won the contest."

"What contest?"

"The Safety Day contest. I asked the best questions and got Sergeant Shine to explain everything. He's actually a pretty cool holo."

I slid into a chair next to Bobby. "Was it his idea to clean the apartment, too?"

"Well, I thought about what he said. 'We're all soldiers in the war against dirt,'" Bobby boomed in his best basso profundo. I laughed as I hugged him.

He pulled away and bent over his textbook. I studied the soft, fine hair,

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the round cheeks with a hint of angular, adult bones beneath. Sergeant Shine. Some male influence.

Don't be ridiculous, Beth, I told myself sharply, but a deep unease settled over me. "Hey, kiddo," I said. "Want to see a movie tonight?"

He shook his head, not even lifting his eyes from the page. "No thanks."

I wasn't surprised; since the anti-violence regulations went into effect, studios have not exactly risen to the challenge. But he would usually show some enthusiasm until we found out that nothing of interest was playing.

I tried again. "How about some *Biodiversity?*"

"Mom." He shot me the barest glance. "I'm studying. Maybe after dinner."

"Dinner. Oh, yeah. I'd better make dinner." I retreated to the kitchen, which looked fabulous. He'd even mopped the floor. It wasn't a huge kitchen, but still—I hadn't mopped the floor in over a year.

I decided he needed a suitable reward and pulled a Suzy Mae cheesecake out to thaw. Suzy appeared, all chatty and confiding. I tried to ignore her. Suzy Mae had her finger in a lot of pies, if you'll pardon the expression, and I thought it kind of weird to be fixing dinner while listening to a spiel about makeup or pantyhose or shaving cream.

"By the way," she said, "I'd like to tell you something you might want to keep in mind the next time you go shopping." I stopped chopping green pepper and watched her. Little holo dimples appeared in her cheeks. "Did you know Proctor and Gamble still conducts secret experiments on animals?"

I dumped the box in the trash.

And there I left it. Bobby's grades went up, Teresa could play for hours with her friends without needing to hang onto me, and the apartment was always spotless. Of course Bobby also took up weight-lifting and Teresa developed an aversion to ice cream I couldn't explain, but worse things could have happened. My kids seemed to be doing okay through no actions of mine and I accepted it. Call me a bad mother; I won't argue.

Warning bells finally rang about a month after my talk with Bobby. I ducked into his room on my weekly foray for laundry. A fool's errand, since he'd been keeping his room much cleaner; yet I hadn't seen the blue dress shirt that I'd gotten him for a soccer banquet in weeks. It could be under the bed.

The shirt wasn't but something else was—a stack of bottles of Sergeant Shine in a neat pyramid. I pulled one out and shook it. Full, but no holo. The batteries were dead.

I sat on the rag rug next to his bed, cradling the bottle, numbed by the picture of my child spending his allowance on cleaning products just so he could have someone to talk to. Shame washed over me like dirty water. I pulled a few more bottles out from under Bobby's bed and carried them into the living room.

My boy looked up from the dining table where he was studying and his face went white. Teresa, who was dishing with her holo-Prissies about clothes and makeup, looked from me to Bobby and her voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry, honey," I said. I couldn't speak of all my sorrow, so I found a smaller substitute. "I didn't mean to pry. I was just looking for your blue dress shirt."

Bobby cleared his throat and stared down at the equations in his book. Lots of "x's" and "y's." Unknowns, I remembered. "That's okay, Mom—I think I left it at Todd's—"

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"Bobby," I burst out, "I'm going to call Big Brothers tomorrow—"

"Mom, no!" Bobby reached for my arm. He'd gotten a lot stronger, and all those bottles tumbled from my grasp and bounced across the table.

"But why?" I wanted to hold him but I forced my voice to sound calm, even. "We need to find you someone to talk to—"

"I have someone to talk to." He looked at me, his eyes narrow, his mouth tight. I saw his man-face. He looked like Rob.

"You talk to a hologram."

"Yeah, well he does a better job than anybody real."

I stepped back. "Well," I said hoarsely, trying to cover my hurt, "you shouldn't have to spend your allowance. Tell me when you need a new bottle. That's the least I can do." I picked up the bottles and marched out.

I pulled the rest of the bottles out from under his bed, one at a time, giving each a shake, until the sergeant appeared. I sat back on my haunches and eyed him. "So you're my son's buddy." He hovered above the bed, eyes twinkling under his regulation buzz cut, spotless fatigues creased with knife-edge precision. I'd always thought he looked like a two-bit martinet and I felt my lip curl. "What do you talk to him about?"

"You want to talk? I'm here for all my soldiers."

"No. My son. Bobby. What do you tell Bobby?" I stared at him, fists clenched.

"You have a son, Bobby? You must be very proud." He beamed at me.

"I thought I was, but—"

"You thought you were proud?"

I stared at him. The bastard was picking words out of my sentences and spitting them back at me. I'd heard of programs like that before. Psychoanalysis programs. "Why the hell do they put a program like that into a piece of crap like you?"

As though I'd pushed a button, a mop appeared in his hand and he snapped to attention. "I'm here to help you clean your home," he boomed. "Face it. Cleaning is not fun. A clean home requires discipline and responsibility—"

Sergeant Shine was a motivational cleanser. I set the bottle on Bobby's nightstand and left him to babble alone.

The next day was Saturday and a few of Teresa's little friends came over to play. My Mom-radar fully engaged, I stood in the doorway to her bedroom for several minutes, watching. All the girls had Prissies and Prissy holos; the dolls put on a fashion show while the holos commented on the dresses. Seemed innocent enough, but something about the scene nagged at me—something I didn't see.

"Reesie, where's Kim? Is she sick?" Kim was Teresa's sworn best friend. The two did everything together.

Teresa made a face. "I don't play with Kim anymore," she announced calmly. "She plays with stupid dolls."

My heart sank. Kim's mom, Renee, forbade Prissies as sexist, oppressive brainwashing tools of the patriarchy. Kim's favorite doll was Captain Jane Gallagher of SpaceForce Prime. She used to lead away teams of Teresa's Prissies to unexplored planets under the dining table. "Captain Gallagher isn't a stupid doll, honey," I said gently.

"Prissy says she is." Three other little girls nodded three little nods, sneered three tiny sneers. I wanted to cry.

After her friends left, I sat Teresa down on the couch, a signal for a grown-

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up talk. Teresa grew solemn and quiet. "Teresa, I'm not mad at you, but I'm disappointed you let a hologram talk you into being mean to Kimmy."

Tears welled. "But her holo doll doesn't like Prissy. We tried to play together, but they won't talk to each other and they say we shouldn't either."

I gathered her into my arms and rocked her. I wanted someone to hate—a person, a face—instead of monolithic companies who considered my daughter the spoils of an all-out war. "Don't turn on the holograms," I said.

Teresa pulled back. "But they're so nice to us—"

I thought of Sergeant Shine. "Do you talk to Prissy a lot, honey?"

Teresa brightened. "All the time. She tells me all kinds of stuff. What to wear, how not to get fat—"

The ice cream. Dammit. She was only six.

"We're going to the toy store tomorrow," I said firmly, and her eyes widened. "I want you to pick out another doll. Maybe you can get a Space-Force Prime doll so you can play with Kimmy again."

Teresa stared up at me, horrified. "I can't do that to Prissy. I can't aba-ab—"

Bobby, who'd been watching silently from the rocker, said, "Abandon. The word is abandon. Like what Dad did to us, remember?"

I winced. "Bobby—I'm sure he loves you in his own way—"

Bobby's lips twisted in an ironic grin. "You're not defending that slob, are you?"

"I—no." I've never lied to my children about Rob. The impulse to start shook me.

"He is a slob, isn't he?" The rocker creaked as Bobby leaned forward. He watched my face like a Doberman watches a prowler. The question held a significance I didn't understand, and I felt that if I gave the wrong answer, I'd get ripped to pieces. "A slob inside and out."

I thought of the mess my life had been with their father; the dirty clothes flung everywhere, the mustard caked on the counter, the way Rob had crushed the hearts of his children like beer cans, dropped them to the floor, and stomped on them on the way out. "Yes," I whispered. "Inside and out."

Bobby leaned back, satisfied. "Maybe I should stop by after school and ask him myself," he said. "If he loves us in his own way, I mean."

So here I am, doing what a mother does best—sitting in the dark and worrying. Dreams plague me: Tony the Tiger crouched over the Trix Rabbit, his jaws a gory mess of blood and fur; Cap'n Crunch, sword upraised, dragging a weeping Betty Crocker by the hair; Sergeant Shine, dressed in battle fatigues, staring at my kitchen floor in disgust, yelling, "You call that clean? Down on your knees, soldier. Lick it 'til it shines."

Before I settled into the rocker I pulled a lemonade out of the fridge. That little dumpy woman with the nasal voice started talking to me. "Best stuff on earth," she said. "Have you tried the Mango Madness?" she said. "You don't buy any of that new age-y stuff, do you? The people who make it are crazy and they'll try to talk you into giving all your money to a cult." I poured the lemonade down the drain.

Other snippets of conversation play through my head.

You're not defending that slob, are you?

We're all soldiers in the war against dirt—

Maybe I should stop by after school and ask him myself—

I feel silly, sitting here in the dark, thinking what I'm trying not to think. I mean, they're only holograms, right? They can't do any harm.

Right? ❍

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UNDERTAKER

The returned starships, old
arks that have been superseded
by newer vessels, lie clustered
at LaGrange Four, as though
leading the Earth around the
sun. Salvagers swarm over
them, pulling out bits and
pieces, until only the empty
hulls remain. They look like
space seeds from the lunar
base where a wrecker enfolded
in a VR helmet attaches a small
booster rocket to each one,
guiding the operation with eye
blinks and head nudges. The
great metal whales had been
home to generations, had
moved the children of Earth
from the thin biosphere of
their cradle to the great
galaxy beyond. Had returned
with exotic life and materials
from the distant stars. Now it
was time to bid them farewell.
The wrecker sheds a tear.
The booster rockets flare,
and the ships begin their
last voyage, like insects
seeking light and heat,
spiraling into the burning
core of the solar system,
finding final rest
in the sun's steady fire.

—Mario Milosevic

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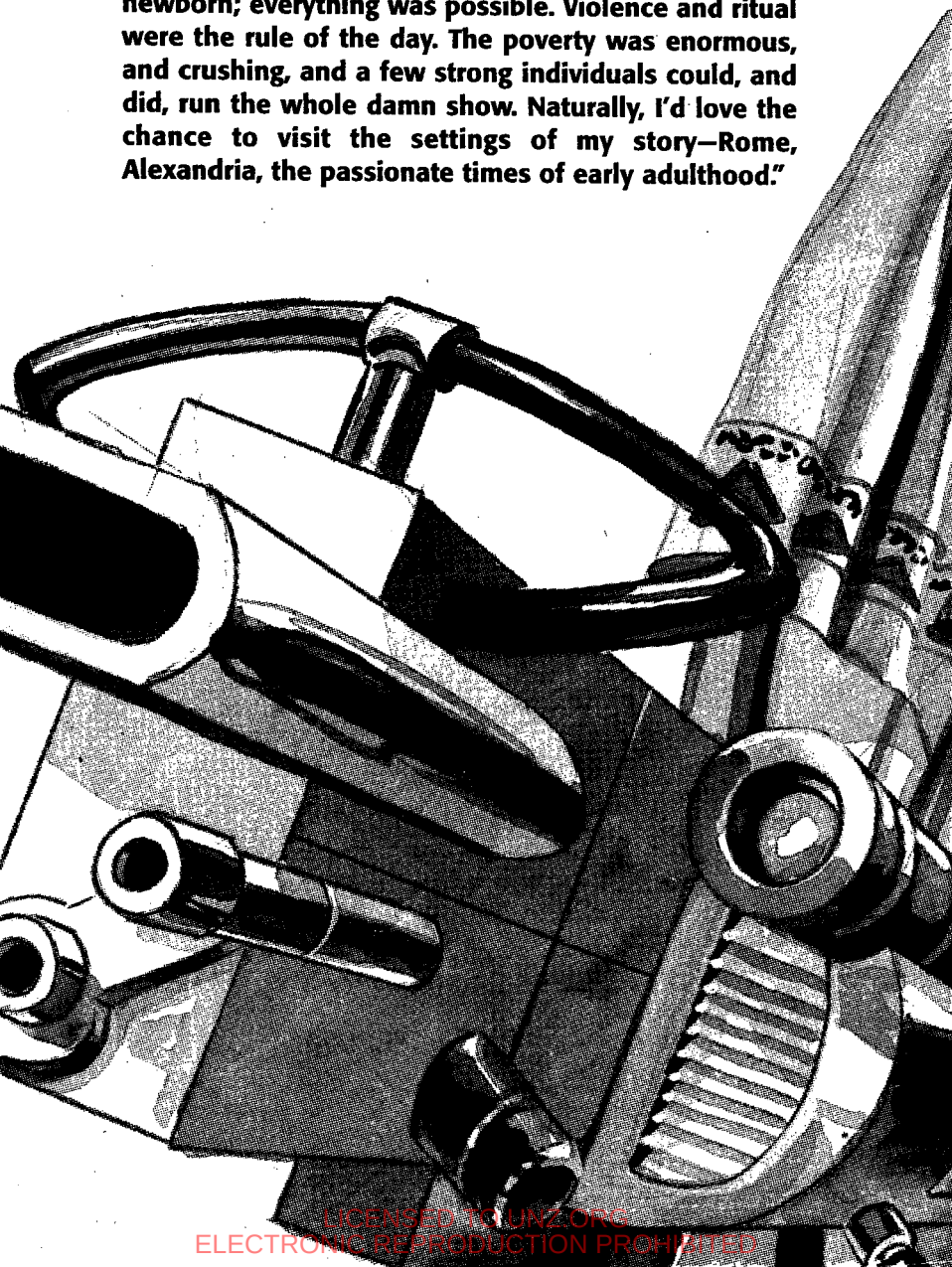
The author tells us he did some rather determined research for "Veritas," which was a small departure for this prolific writer and compulsive liar. "The Rome I chose is an earlier, less cosmopolitan world from the one usually portrayed by Hollywood. The empire was newborn; everything was possible. Violence and ritual were the rule of the day. The poverty was enormous, and crushing, and a few strong individuals could, and did, run the whole damn show. Naturally, I'd love the chance to visit the settings of my story—Rome, Alexandria, the passionate times of early adulthood."



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VERITAS

Robert Reed

Illustration by Mark Evans

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I

"You deserve the truth, but the dumb truth is that I don't have an exact date. We were freshmen, and it had to be the spring semester. March or early April, I'm guessing. It was evening, probably late. A CD was playing, but I'm not even going to guess the song. I know that I was sitting at my desk, and my roommate was stretched out on his bed. He was reading last week's assignment for World Lit. *The Aeneid*. That's one little detail about which I am sure. I can't recall what I was studying, but I have a clear memory of staring down at blurring pages, trying to concentrate. Then this odd sensation came to me. It was as if a bird was scratching at the back of my head. Here, right under my left ear. And after a moment or two of trying to ignore the bird, I turned around in my chair.

"Lucian was eighteen, like me. But where I was a big, plain-faced boy, shy and intellectual, my roommate was this staggeringly handsome character with rugged Greek features and an easy, pushy charm. When I turned around, I found Lucian staring at me. Staring, and smiling. His dark eyes were huge and bright, and they were slicing through me. It seemed to me as if Lucian was glowing, as if some powerful white fire was burning inside him, seeping out of his pores and those big eyes and between his wide white teeth. He startled me. He actually had me scared. I gulped, and then under my breath, I muttered, 'Are you okay?'

"I loved Lucian. Not in a physical sense, no. But in every other way, I adored the man. We didn't know each other until that year, but the gods had decided that we were destined for each other. The God of Student Housing had thrown us into the same tiny dormitory room, and we became instant and perfect friends. To me, Lucian was a wonder. A revelation. The man had already lived in four different countries, mastering as many languages. He could tell story after story about exotic lands that I would never see. His family wasn't wealthy, but they had comfortable money, and he was always generous with his allowance. And even better, Lucian was generous with all those pretty girls that gathered around him. Believe me, there is no quicker, surer way to win the devotion of a horny young man than get him laid from time to time.

"I looked at my friend, and I asked him, 'Are you okay?'

"Lucian was wearing baggy shorts and a baggy shirt with its sleeves cut away. A hat was perched on that thick black hair. Our school mascot sat above the brim, and the hat was tilted back at the usual cocky angle. I had walked in Lucian's shadow for months, and I knew him better than I knew my own brother; but at that moment, he was wearing a strange wide smile that I didn't recognize—a crazed, spellbound expression drained of all humor.

"I said, 'What?'

"He said to me, 'Nothing.'

"'Then quit staring at me,' I begged.

"'Was I staring?' he replied. Then he closed *The Aeneid* and threw his legs off the bed and stretched his back. 'Didn't mean to bug you,' he promised. 'I was just thinking.'

"'Thinking what?' I asked.

"'What we should do,' he began. 'Not tomorrow or next week. But eventually. What we should do is gather up a group of people, and train them, and then travel back in time and conquer the Roman Empire.'

"Those were his exact words.

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"I just sat there. And then he asked me, 'What do you think?'

"'Fine,' I said. 'Why not?' Then I shrugged my shoulders and turned back to my book, a tiny voice inside me shouting:

"'Son-of-a-bitch! He means it!'"

II

Jonathon Colfax pauses.

Technicians have crowded around one of the cameras. With a purposeful panic, they remove an iron panel and reach inside the machine's guts, fingers prying and poking, soft voices cursing the gods and their own miserable luck. None of them look at their emperor. Perhaps they believe that no one will notice the commotion. But Colfax takes an interest in their work, grasping a sweating glass of water and ice, and after a moment, with the barest grimace, he announces his small but important displeasure.

Octavian steps forward. With a reasonable tone, he remarks, "Two more cameras are still at work, your excellence."

Colfax reaches over his head, tapping the fat microphone. "What about the audio?"

The project director rushes into view. He has traveled all the way from Alexandria, bringing his cumbersome tools and earnest crew for the purpose of filming the living god who rules the world. Egyptian by blood and Roman by bearing, the director has no patience for incompetence, particularly from his subordinates. With a razored fury, he demands explanations. He and his technicians employ Greek, distinctly American words like "camera" and "shit" mixed into the conversation. When he finds his answers, he turns to Colfax and bows. "The microphones and tape machines are strong," he announces, using his best American. "And the sick camera can be healed, your excellence!"

Colfax sips the cold water, saying nothing.

"Elsewhere," Octavian commands. "Drag the machine away, and repair it somewhere else."

"Yes, of course." The Egyptian bows only to the emperor, as if he had just given the order. Then he waves at his underlings, making them grab hold of the machine and its thick cables, a withering stare and a tight-lipped fury prodding them to work. "Hurry, hurry," he urges. Then to deflect any blame, he tells a random face, "This is entirely your fault."

Colfax twirls his glass, watching the ice cubes climb the slick walls.

"Your excellence," says another voice.

He sets the glass onto the milky-white marble, admitting, "I may have lost my place. Could you remind me, my dear—?"

Only one woman is present, and she sits at the far end of the table. Like the cameramen and anxious technicians, she was born in Egypt, but her status is entirely different. By birth, she is a queen. By trade, she is a journalist currently residing in Rome. On a daily basis, her face and rich alto voice bring news to Romans everywhere. Like her mother, she is only a little beautiful, but she also possesses her mother's genius for winning the souls of men. With a winsome look, she can feed any man's vanities. Leaning against the marble table, she can stare at the elderly emperor, and, with nothing but a gentle warm smile, she reminds him that he is the undisputed center of Creation.

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"Lucian," she says, using an impeccable American. "You were telling us about Lucian, and yourself, and your journey through Time."

Colfax nods, glancing at the nearest camera. It is a bulky, cold contraption, the film whirring inside it like a stiff blood, making its way through an apparatus built from iron and carved wood and lenses polished by the hard, deft hands of highly trained slaves.

"It had to be in that spring," Colfax allows. "That's when time travel became possible. Physicists had just discovered the means, and news had leaked out. The first time machines were already being built. Of course they were going to be expensive and experimental, and a multitude of governmental powers were in control. But still, time travel had become a genuine possibility. It was real enough that two young men could sit in their dorm room, drink cheap beer, and plot their conquest of an ancient world."

The journalist covers her mouth, eyes wide in fascination.

Colfax wears an old-style tunic with a toga neatly folded over his shoulders, fine wools dyed white as cream and trimmed with a narrow purple stripe. Octavian suggested this wardrobe: Citizens from every corner of the Empire would eventually see this interview, and more than not, Romans were a decidedly traditional people. And in the same spirit, the woman wears an equally traditional garb: A simple gray tunic tied at the waist and beneath her breasts, the blue palla draped over her left shoulder, her black hair tied back in an elegant bun.

"Your excellence," the woman purrs. "Your audience would love to hear your explanation of time and how a soul can travel through it."

"Ah, but time travel is an easy trick," he jokes. "Each day is a journey in time, isn't it?"

She laughs appreciatively.

Colfax waits for a moment, and then offers the most familiar explanation. "The universe is a house. A great, glorious house filled with countless rooms." He lifts a hand, sketching that house in the air. "Each room is eternal. Each room embraces a single instant in Time and Space. You and I are standing together inside one room. Behind us is a single door leading back in time, but not far back. No, it only leads to the previous instant. While ahead of us stand an infinite number of doorways, each leading to a different room that embraces the next instant.

"Every possible future is waiting for us there. That's what the physicists of my time discovered. And when they played with the mathematics, they realized that there was a third type of door. With the proper tools, a person could cut a temporary hole in the ceiling and crawl up into the future. Ten seconds or ten million years could be crossed in a blink. But if that person punched a hole in the floor, he could drop backward in time. He would find himself standing inside an older room, a past instant. But as always, a single door would stand behind our time traveler, leading to the past he knows; while straight ahead would be countless doors, each leading to one of the myriad possible futures."

"A remarkable discovery," the woman offers.

"It's a remarkable house," Colfax adds, showing a narrow smile. "Our physicists learned just how remarkable and enduring it is. For instance, let's imagine that you journey back in time." He says her name quietly, with affection. "Sarah," he says. "You drop into your past, and instantly, the past divides. Where there was one room, now two exist. One room is unchanged, blissfully ignorant of your existence, while the other simply adapts to your

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presence. You might bump into the furniture, and of course the men will smile at you, and most important, now all of those doors standing before you will lead to futures of your own making.

"It is, I think, an elegant, lovely arrangement. The universe is a house built of possibilities. Everything possible will happen, and every moment is eternal. And in one fashion or another, we are all travelers in time."

Nobody speaks.

His eyes narrow to thoughtful slits. "When Lucian and I were sophomores, our physics department offered an undergraduate class in time mechanics. Lucian decided we should take it. 'Laying the groundwork,' he called it. A graduate student fresh from a summer at Sandia taught the class. That's one of the labs where they were building a prototype time machine. The woman was an excellent instructor, smart and charming. I am not a gifted scientist myself—"

A disagreeing murmur drifts from the shadows.

"But I did well in that class," he admits with an easy, proud smile. "Quite well, actually. I discovered a talent for thinking impossible thoughts. I learned quite a bit about time and quantum wellsprings. I took copious notes that I loaned to Lucian, since he rarely made it to class. Sometimes I'd repeat the lectures to him, trying to make him appreciate this very complex business. Which is the best way to learn any subject, I think. Teach it, and it becomes yours."

The smile fades. "More than once, I warned Lucian. I told him that we couldn't invade Rome. When we dropped into the past, we would lose the present. An entirely new timestream would erupt. A multitude of unique and unfamiliar futures would erupt from our first instant there, and there was no knowing what those futures might hold.

"'But our earth is still here, right?' he asked.

"'It is,' I admitted. 'Our timestream is always going to be safe and intact. It's just sitting in a different part of the universe. For all intents and purposes, it's unreachable. Invisible. Lost.'

"Lucian enjoyed a big laugh. He had a wonderful, infectious laugh. He used it until I was laughing with him, and then he slapped me on the knee, asking, 'But isn't that best? I mean, if we're going to do this thing . . . and we are going to do it . . . well, then, shouldn't we be willing to give up *everything*. . . ?'

"I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"'Great undertakings demand commitment and sacrifice,' he assured me. And then he said, 'Sacrifice,' again. As if everything important was embodied in that one word. . . !"

Colfax allows his voice to trail away.

For a long moment, the only sound is the rattle of film passing through the two working cameras. Then the journalist prompts him, saying, "Commitment," with a genuine curiosity. "I know a few stories about those early years. And there are some third-hand accounts. But I was hoping to hear the truth from you. Your excellence. About Lucian, and the rest of the inner circle. . . . "

Colfax waits for a moment. Then with a deceptively quiet voice, he admits, "Lucian never finished that class in time travel. In fact, he got a spectacularly awful grade on the final exam."

Technicians and younger servants bristle. It feels like a sacrilege, hearing that the Great Lucian could fail at anything.

But then Colfax shakes his head, adding, "The man was a genius in dif-

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ferent ways. Better ways, I suppose." He shrugs, and sighs. "That year and for the rest of college, we shared a little apartment off-campus. I had one more exam to take, and Lucian asked me when I was coming home, and I told him. When I got home, on schedule, I didn't think about knocking. I simply unlocked the door and walked in, and I found Lucian on our old couch, screwing our professor. Like two dogs screwing. They were naked, and he was behind her, pumping away and winking over at me, as if we were trading this funny little joke."

The old man breathes through his nostrils, and he tries to make his shoulders relax, and after a long moment, he mentions, "Theresa was a genuinely beautiful woman. And she was wondrously smart. And like all of us, she was absolutely in love with Lucian."

Colfax looks away from the cameras, muttering under his breath.

"The Empress of Tears. Isn't that how you refer to her today?"

III

The emperor's face has always been narrow and bony. What little remains of his hair is snow-white and cut short, and his thick white whiskers are shaved each morning by a trusted Nubian. Artful touches of makeup help disguise his age and faltering health, but sometimes the hot lights will catch him honestly, and everything is apparent. Always thin, he looks emaciated now. His chin and cheeks are too sharp, and the normally bright blue-white eyes have grown pale and unfocused. By nature, he is a quiet, thoughtful person. Senators and slaves alike have difficulty reading the man's emotions. Those few who know him well have learned to watch his eyes, measuring his mood by following his gaze and noting how often he blinks. At this moment, the old man appears sad. His face is like stone, pale and cold, but he blinks slowly, betraying exhaustion and a deep sorrow. Perhaps he regrets having agreed to this interview. Naturally, he can end it with a word. He can say, "Enough," and Octavian will wave in the Praetorians. In an instant, the various machines will be turned off, the film and audio tapes confiscated and destroyed. Within the hour, their guests from the Great Library will be driven back to Naples and put onboard their sleek clipper ship, then paid in gold for their troubles and ordered to say nothing about what has happened here and what failed to happen.

But the emperor doesn't end the interview.

Instead, he seems to will himself into a change of mood. After a lengthy pause, he smiles again. The blue eyes brighten, if only for a moment. Again he looks across the marble table, and with a tender voice, he tells his interviewer, "I was a junior when I met your father. Forrester was an old freshman. He was practically thirty, which made him seem very old and extraordinarily wise."

He laughs.

Most of the audience laughs with him, but quietly.

The journalist just smiles at the mention of her father, and after a moment, she confesses, "From what I understand, he rarely spoke about those times."

"Really?"

"'I left that world for this one,' he would tell Mother. She tried to make him talk, but he would just shake his head, asking, 'Why dwell on things lost?'"

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"Sounds like your father." Colfax sighs. He opens his mouth and closes it, and then he opens it again. "Lucian found him. Forrester had been in the Army for twelve years, part of an elite unit called the Rangers. He had experience in combat, and he was strong in every way you can be strong, and he was accustomed to leading young men in desperate circumstances.

"The university was a great hunting ground for talent. Any large school has thousands of young people, each sick with dreams and half-born talents. Lucian tried to teach me his tricks. 'Go up to a stranger,' he said, 'and talk honestly. That's all. Tell him that you've got an adventure waiting, if he's interested. Invite him to one of our meetings. Mention time travel. Mention Rome. But don't give away specifics. Tell him that he'll discover what he needs to know at our next meeting.'

"Except, of course, we admitted almost nothing at the meetings. They were for show. Once a month, we gathered in the basement of a local pizza parlor. Lucian paid for everyone's dinner and the beer, and he gave a speech about the majesty of Rome and its history, and he showed a few slides of ruins and artists' renderings, and then with a big smile, he described how we would jump back in time to give the Romans all the wonders of our age. We would make the Empire into a larger, stronger nation. And oh, by the way, once we arrived there, all of us were going to be worshipped as gods."

He laughs, shaking his head. "The meetings were proving grounds. After the speech, Lucian went from table to table, offering light conversation while making a hard assessment of character. Of spirit. Only a couple of dozen people earned their way into our inner circle. Forrester was one of three men with military training. He also was a history major, which made him doubly useful. And best of all, he had a backbone, and if he had a reason, he would challenge Lucian.

"'It sounds easy enough,' your father said to us, early on. 'We simply march back two thousand years and kick Roman ass. Of course we'll win! We've got machine guns and airplanes and napalm. What legion can fight against those kinds of fury?'

"'But it won't be that easy,' Lucian countered, winking at the rest of us now. 'That's what you're hinting at. Aren't you?'

"'I'm not hinting. I'm telling!' I remember Forrester chewing on his lower lip, building up a head of steam. 'Okay, suppose we can actually get hold of a time machine. Which is a big suppose. And suppose we actually do send ourselves into the past. We've still got trouble. Everyone has to make the jump together; otherwise, we'd end up in different timestreams. And we can take only so many people and so many weapons. Yet the way I understand it, there's no way to jump back to the present to pick new supplies at the Wal-Mart.'"

The Egyptians make furious notes. "What is a Wal-Mart?" they want to know; but nobody dares interrupt the emperor now.

"'Those are genuine problems,' Lucian agreed. The inner circle was meeting at our apartment. Our graduate student was sitting beside him on the old couch. Lucian threw a fond arm around her, saying, 'Theresa here can fill you in on all the sweet technical details.' Then he promised, 'Time machines aren't the problem. The prototypes have been a dream for the scientists. The next generation of machines will get simpler and cheaper. But I agree with you, sure. We absolutely have to take everything with us. That's why we have to be thorough. Once we go, there's no coming back again.'

"Forrester shrugged his shoulders. He was a surprisingly small man.

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Many good soldiers are small, I've noticed. But he had a presence. A power. If he'd walked out of that meeting, chances are he would have taken a few of our followers with him. 'We can't carry enough bullets,' he warned Lucian, and all of us. 'There's fifty or a hundred million people in that empire. And I don't care how many guns and bombs we drag along. If they want us dead, they'll find a way to overwhelm us!'

"But Lucian was ready. It was like a well-planned ambush, actually. 'First of all,' he said, 'you have to realize something. These old empires were frail things. Most of those millions were slaves or as poor as shit, and they didn't particularly care who was sitting in the palace. Invaders were always coming in and killing a few thousand of the elite, then grafting their heads onto the headless State.'

"'Maybe so,' Forrester admitted. 'But at those pizza parties, you talk as if nobody is going to die. We just show up and smile and do some magic tricks, and these unsophisticated souls are going to fight for the chance to do our bidding.'

"'It won't be that easy,' Lucian agreed.

"'So we need to take more soldiers,' Forrester said. 'Or better still, we need to recruit murderers and other shits. We need the sorts of people who can happily machinegun our enemies.' He shivered for a moment, then asked, 'Is that your general plan?'

"'I want the best possible weapons,' Lucian admitted. Then he looked at the rest of us, his expression never more sober or self-assured. I didn't know what he was going to say. He had kept this part of his scheme secret, waiting for the perfect moment. 'What we need most,' he allowed, 'is a weapon of pure terror. A weapon that will win every battle for us, and leave our enemies without a shred of hope.'

"'We can't get nukes,' Forrester growled. 'So you must be thinking of poor-man weapons. Botulism. Smallpox. Which one of those horrors are we going to take with us?'

"'The man had a point. And this wasn't the first time that I was bothered by these awful thoughts.

"'We aren't Romans,' I blurted out. Finally. Then I looked at my best friend in the world, and feeling like a traitor, I admitted, 'I don't want to kill and maim. If that's what we're talking about . . . using plagues to keep control. . . .'

"Lucian just stared at us.

"With a look, he made each of us feel as if we had let him down. As if we were shoving knives into his belly and his aching heart. And then he caressed Theresa on the shoulder, and with the easiest, most relaxed voice, he said, 'Think about it. Isn't it obvious?'

"Then before any of the ignorant could guess at the answer, Lucian explained what he was planning . . . what was sitting in front of our very stupid eyes. . . !"

IV

Colfax pauses, allowing his audience a moment to consider the simple, bloodless horror embodied in his silence. Then he sighs and lifts his glass, finding it empty, and as his hand descends, a second hand darts from the shadows, yanking the glass away even as a third, unmatched hand sets before him another tall glass of filtered water and crystalline ice.

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He says, "No. Something sweet."

Nothing happens.

"A fizzy sweet," he adds, and a burly hand produces a new glass filled with a bubbling brown treat. After a sip, he looks at his drink. "We brought the formula with us," he mentions. "It was a gift from a friendly corporation. They were tickled by the idea of Romans enjoying their carbonated prune juice." He sets the glass on the white marble and sighs, and he says, "What we brought," as he glances up at the watching cameras.

"You brought the future to us," the journalist mentions, her purring voice somewhere between awe and gratitude.

"Pieces of the future, yes." Colfax hesitates. "Lucian routinely promised that we would leave in just another year or two. 'We're well on our way,' he kept chiming. But the promises always came with winks and sideways smiles. The inner circle understood: Nothing this enormous would happen quickly or easily. Lucian would say, 'Soon,' just to keep everyone focused. What he wanted, and what he cultured, was a wartime mentality—that potent sense that every moment mattered, that every decision was a fulcrum on which our dreams teetered.

"Nothing sobers the mind more than knowing that you must bring everything on a one-way voyage. Machinery and power production and people with skills and the intellectual skeleton of a high-technology world: All of that had to be purchased, or won over, or in a few cases, stolen. Everyone involved in the project had suggestions. Every voice in the inner circle wanted to take some critical piece of our world; and Lucian, being Lucian, agreed with each of us. We needed modern crops as well as trusted heirlooms. We needed libraries, both as paper books and CD-ROMs. We had to have codes of conduct and top notch medical equipment and kick-ass uniforms. And most important, we required talented recruits. But each recruit always knew two or three others who would 'love' to make the journey with us, who would be 'thrilled' to belong to this wonderful adventure . . . and after several years, we found ourselves at the helm of an organization complete with offices and half a dozen warehouses and more than a thousand earnest, dues-paying members.

"Science sculpted our mission, too. We weren't just traveling through time, we were also moving in space. When we arrived in the past, our bodies and machines and overstuffed suitcases would displace whatever was there before us. With a structured violence, we would explode into existence, pushing aside people and buildings and the land beneath our feet. That's why we had to aim for the sea. Water and the warm Mediterranean winds would offer a soft, safe landing. But that meant that we had to have a solid seaworthy boat to carry us those last few leagues toward Rome.

"A boat large enough to carry hundreds is no longer a boat. It is a ship. Lucian's family had money, and everyone else contributed what he or she could bear. But most of us were fresh out of school. Each of us had a few gold coins to offer, but it didn't make for a fortune."

Colfax sips the fizzy sweet.

One of the cameras makes a worrisome clatter, but before anyone can attempt to fix it, it seems to cure itself with a sharp, sudden ping.

"Lucian finally admitted, 'We need help.' Only the inner circle was present. He looked past us and repeated himself. He shook his head and said, 'We need help,' and I heard the ache in his voice. We'd invested seven years in our project, but a thousand years wouldn't be enough. We'd begun losing

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believers faster than we could find new ones. Our cash flow was suddenly a mess. I didn't know it at the time, but Lucian's family, understandably troubled by this crazy venture, had taken away his trust funds. But Lucian refused to be stymied. Every problem had its answer, and every answer was best delivered with a determined smile. 'We need a new partner,' he told us, grinning broadly. 'We need a dreamer with cash and resources and the simple will to use his great gifts.'

"'Is there such a bird?' Forrester asked.

"'There is," Lucian purred, showing us a cocky wink. 'And I think I know who he is.'

"I don't know where he found the billionaire. I suspect that Lucian launched a thousand letters and e-mails, contacting important assistants in hopes they might pass along a message to their very busy bosses. Whatever his methods, he eventually made contact with a youngish, high-tech billionaire curious enough to give us thirty minutes. The four of us went, but it was Lucian who did the bulk of the talking. And in many ways, it was his finest speech. He was charming and humorous, and he was captivating, describing the majesty of Rome and the wonders that we would bring to that golden age. I was convinced. I was enthralled, and energized. I didn't even hear the billionaire say, 'No.' But then I noticed the faces of my friends, and it dawned on me that something awful had just happened.

"'I have a rule,' the billionaire was saying. 'I don't pay for trips that I'm not going to take, and honestly, I have no intention of going with you.'

"That brought everything to a sputtering stop.

"'Why would I leave this world?' he asked us. 'My fortune is here. My power and name are established here. What you want to achieve, I already have. And this is, I think, a much nicer life than anything you or I can find in the past.'

"Those prescient words struck me and rolled off.

"Forrester looked wounded. I felt frustrated and disgusted, and for a moment, I genuinely hated that rich son-of-a-bitch. Theresa was watching Lucian, and she was scared. If anything, he was hit worse than the rest of us. For the first time in Lucian's life, his charms had failed him. Real doubts were chewing at his insides. He was plainly devastated by the blunt rejection. He was furious and miserable and lost. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had stood up right then and flung himself through the office window. That's how awful he looked to me.

"It was Theresa who saved the day.

"She loved Lucian. They had been married for two years, and really, she adored the man. She would do anything to help him. That's why she leaned forward and smiled at our rude host. Her hair was black and long and thick, and she had smart brown eyes that could grab a man. She grabbed the billionaire with a piercing stare and a piece of cleavage, and then with a smoldering voice, she said, 'Sir. You must have a few friends, and I bet they're rich, too. Among them, is there anyone who might be interested in what we're offering?'

"The billionaire shook his head, saying, 'No.'

"But then he thought again, and with a little shrug, he said, 'Mark Lightbody. I don't know him well, but he's got a bug for adventure. Inherited wealth does that for some. If you wrap things up in the right kind of package, the man might take a passing interest in your bullshit.'"

* * *

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Colfax pauses.

The journalist reads his face and posture, and she decides to mention the name, "Marcus."

"That was his idea," Colfax reports. "'Call me Marcus,' he announced at the first meeting. 'It'll help get me into the right mindset.'

"As a joke, under my breath, I said, 'Marcus Lightbodicus.'

"And he laughed hard, saying, 'Sure. Why not?'"

Another pause.

"Mark was this tiny fellow," Colfax reports. "Barely five foot four. He was Forrester's age, but he acted like a spoiled teenager. He needed to interrupt. He loved to boast. He was unreasonable and brash and blessed with this crazy energy that actually worked, on occasion. For instance, it was his idea to use cruise liners. They were cities onto themselves, able to house thousands and carry cargo, too. And he didn't want us to settle for a retired liner with a creaky hull. He went shopping and came home with not one ship, but three gigantic liners. 'The industry is in a funk,' he announced. 'And so I thought, hey, why not three for the price of two?'

"Our new partner decided that we needed to completely reconfigure the ships, which took time. He also demanded better munitions and fancier equipment and training, and more recruits and still more training. Every suggestion cost millions. The scope of our operation kept widening and widening. And to an astonishing degree, Lucian was patient, letting Marcus say and do pretty much whatever he wanted.

"The two men were never friends.

"I was Lucian's friend. Theresa was Lucian's wife and lover. And Forrester couldn't have been more devoted to our mission. But practically from the day we met Marcus, there was an understanding. The little man would chatter away, and the rest of us would pretend to listen. We would tell him, 'Thank you,' with gushy, earnest voices. And then we would look at each other. Not winking, exactly. But setting our jaws in a certain way. We knew what was at stake, and we knew just what was necessary to get this job done."

V

Colfax pauses, throwing a reflective glance at his fizzy sweet.

"*Virtue*. And *Truth*. And *Justice*." The journalist names the legendary ships with a palpable reverence. "All the gold in this world couldn't have built even one of those astonishing vessels. That's what my mother says, explaining those days."

The old man nods, a private smile breaking loose.

"You were thirty-three years old when you arrived," she mentions. "Even with Marcus' help, it had taken another eight years of preparation."

He says, "Yes."

He nods and explains, "Nothing important is easy. We had to make the ships more useful. We had to enlarge and improve their cargo holds. There were no dry docks where we were going, so we'd have to make repairs at sea, without heavy cranes or external power sources. And there was the problem with fuel. Should we drag along a giant tanker ship, too? But that would limit our mobility, and with a stray spark, we would have been dead in the water. So after several missteps, we decided to rebuild each ship's en-

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gine and the Hum-vee engines and the motors inside the little seaplanes that constituted our air force. Alcohol was our fuel of choice. Pure grain alcohol could be made from most any vegetable matter. Each of the big ships had a distillery next to its fuel tanks. Each was a steel cow ready to graze its way around the Mediterranean. Engine performance was hurt, naturally; but even plodding at seventeen knots, we would be the swiftest navy in the world.

"Eight years filled with constant, numbing preparation.

"Every lucid moment was busy. Recruits had to be given suitable jobs, and trained. Chains of command were created and tested and reconfigured and tested again. This is when I finally learned how to give orders. And we had endless troubles with governments and certain people. Nobody liked our munitions stockpiles. To the news media, we were a cult using mind-bending techniques on the weak to steal them away from their families and the present. Armies of lawyers descended on us, trying to steal back our followers and sue us dry. Tax collectors and Senate committees gave us too much scrutiny. And worst of all, we still had to acquire a working time machine—not just a little scientific toy for laboratory work, but a rugged machine with enough muscle to punch a gaping hole in the present, allowing more than a million metric tons of metal and men to descend into the past.

"There were stretches when I doubted that we'd ever succeed.

"And then I looked up one day, and, to my joyful surprise, I realized that we were finally ready.

"It was March, by coincidence. On a sunny weekend afternoon, our flotilla gathered off the coast of Italy. Our three main ships and two freight barges and several dozen auxiliary boats were bunched together. The world's press watched from a safe distance, and between them and us were the sleek, modern ships of three navies. Fifteen years had passed since time travel had become a reality. For the last few years, the public had been able to rent licensed time machines. ChronoAbles, they were called: Chrono for time, and Able for the man who perfected the mechanism. Only a few individuals and some small groups had abandoned the present. The terminally ill would leap into the future, hoping their ailments could be cured there. Misfits went into the past, looking for romance and purpose. But we were a different creation. We were vast and organized, dramatic and ambitious, and the entire world watched as we made our final, fateful preparations.

"I was in command of the *Truth*. Which means that I told the ship's real captain what to do. Marcus had the *Justice*. And Lucian ruled the entire venture, as well as our lead ship, the *Virtue*. Using ship-to-ship, he gave a brisk little speech about duty and adventure. But honestly, it was one of his weaker speeches. He stumbled over his words. He sounded tentative and a little sad. Later, Theresa confided to me that Lucian was sitting on the toilet, suffering some kind of gastric nightmare while giving the speech. Brought on by nerves, I would think. Until that final moment, I doubt that Lucian had ever really understood what he was asking of us. Until that last day, our goal was just a distant abstraction. An elaborate and fulfilling game that came to an end when he put his mouth to the microphone, offering those now-famous words:

"'To make a better world.'"

With a wry little grin, Colfax admits, "I wrote those words."

"It is a fine phrase," the woman replies.

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"'To make a better world,' was the prearranged signal," he explains. "Our ChronoAble was lashed to the *Virtue*'s superstructure. Theresa had already deployed her sensors and finished her calibrations. Fat power cables ran from every ship's generators into banks of capacitors, and more cable carried the combined jolt of energy to the machine itself. A disruption was created. For that first microsecond, the disruption was little bigger than the tip of a finger. Then Theresa and her staff gave it an electrical charge, and they launched it.

"In many ways, our time machine resembled a cumbersome piece of artillery. The stainless steel barrel was pointed straight up at the cloudless blue sky, and the disruption burst from its muzzle, resembling a tiny, brilliant flare. And then, the flare began to mature. It sparkled and expanded, acquiring more mass, and its momentum began to fail. We watched, spellbound, while the disruption hovered for what seemed like forever. And then the earth pulled it down again. The disruption was maturing at a set pace. By then, it resembled a cloud of white-hot plasma. Except that it had no real temperature. Its awesome energies were elsewhere, busily ripping a new door in the floor of the universe. Like a cold, heavy blanket, it fell across our fleet, and for that next fraction of a nanosecond, a new doorway lay open beneath us.

"In an instant, without a hint of motion, it was night. We were floating in the same sea, but now there were stars overhead, and our ships and the seawater that we had brought with us were pushing aside millions of gallons of native water. I was standing on my bridge, watching an enormous ripple pass off into the dark distance. And then our navigator came running, almost breathless. He had a calendar based on star charts and the phases of the moon. He blurted out an approximate date. A month and year. 'From where Polaris sits,' he sputtered, 'and where the moon is, and the constellations . . . well, it could be 44 BC, and it is definitely, definitely the middle of March. . . !'"

Colfax waits for a moment, and then he glances at his associate. With a nod, he remarks, "Your great-uncle was a few days dead, and the Empire was in chaos."

Octavian offers a narrow smile, bowing with a certain curt grace.

"Chaos," the emperor repeats. Then his eyes narrow, and he admits, "Yet it seemed like a very peaceful chaos to me. That night and those calm seas . . . honestly, I felt more like a tourist than a conqueror."

The pale eyes are distant, and enthralled.

"We left the cruise ships and Marcus offshore," he continues. "The other members of the inner circle boarded an alcohol-powered yacht, and with little boats flanking us, we chugged our way toward the coast. The mouth of the Tiber lay straight ahead. We navigated using nightscopes and the enduring hills. In the pre-dawn gloom, we landed at Ostia—Rome's harbor—and if it wasn't obvious before, we realized it then. We were in a very different world now. Upstream was the cleanest, finest city on the planet. But the Tiber was filthy. We could smell and see the raw sewage that had been shoved downstream by the winter rains. For good symbolic reasons, Lucian was first to step onto the dry land, and he ended up slipping his way through a pile of anonymous shit. Then he looked up at me and laughed, and everyone laughed. And he cried out, 'Goddamn! This place is a dump!'

"Our Hum-vees were unloaded. Forrester sent out recon squads, and we found the road leading to Rome. The Via Ostiensis. Lucian insisted on dri-

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ving the lead vehicle, his eyes big as windows and his teeth shining in the reflected glare of the headlights. 'A fucking rough road,' he pointed out, more than once. 'Aren't you surprised, Jonathon? These ugly little buildings and this awful pavement . . . I mean, don't things look awfully shabby to you. . . ?'

"I had invested fifteen years making ready for this moment. I had studied and imagined and dreamed, and no, I wasn't even a little surprised. I was thrilled and astonished and pleasantly scared, but really, everything looked pretty much as it had in my dreams.

"'The road's not that rough,' I offered.

"'We'll have to repave,' he promised. 'As soon as we get the oil flowing from Libya, we'll put down a good thick layer of asphalt.'

"Rome wasn't expecting to be invaded. Not that night, and certainly not by men like us. We were wearing Kevlar and tough riot helmets, and we had weapons. I had a pistol. Forrester alone carried enough firepower to take on a legion. But we didn't fire a shot. When we found the city's gates locked, Lucian unleashed his terror weapon. The weapon rode on its own Hum-vee, its generators riding on trailers. Winking at me, he said, 'Name a date.'

"'I don't know,' I muttered.

"He shrugged and walked faster. Theresa was sitting with the weapon. She called him, 'Darling,' and they kissed. Then Lucian whispered into her ear, and she flinched, a little bit. Flinched and said, 'It doesn't have to be that big. I can take away the gates and leave the wall standing.'

"'But where's the spectacle in that?' he asked, giggling at her. Then he shouted at Theresa's people, repeating his precise orders.

"The generators and several small capacitors went to work. Lucian himself decided on a date, and Theresa aimed the stainless steel barrel, and she did some quick calibrations, and a minuscule disruption was created inside the weapon's reaction chamber. The flash was sudden and silent. I dipped my head and shut my eyes, missing everything. But like good tourists, we had cameras, and I'm sure you've seen the footage. The gate stands there. And the great stone wall. You can see guards warily peering over the top of the wall. And then the disruption spreads and matures, and a few thousand tons of stone and wood, and muscle and brain, are catapulted through time.

"The ChronoAble was our terror weapon.

"On land, with portable generators, it was a tactical device. But when the device was lashed to the *Virtue* and powered by the ship's entire electrical plant, it could, in principle, fling a small city into another age.

"The guards and gate and a long portion of the wall vanished. Except for the tumbling of a few loose stones, nothing moved before us.

"Quietly, I asked my friend, 'What date did you pick?'

"He shrugged his shoulders. 'Ten thousand years ago, about.'

"Then before I could comment, he added, 'I liked the idea. The image. A partial wall standing in a wilderness, and no clue as to how it got there.' He laughed. 'Quite a puzzle for Mr. and Mrs. Cro-Magnon. Isn't it?'"

"Then it was dawn," says the emperor, "and we found ourselves here. Here in the heart of Rome, in the Forum itself. Our best translator—a Latin scholar who giggled and nearly wet himself—began to shout at the few citizens and slaves watching from a distance. He kept telling them, 'We are gods. We want to meet with Mark Antony and the senators. Get them for us now, and we will be grateful. Ignore us, and you will know our wrath!'

"Lucian was sitting on the hood of his Hum-vee. He had put on a CD, old

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rock and roll setting a harsh mood. With a flourish, he pointed skyward, and with his other hand, he spoke into a radio, saying, 'Do it now!'

"His orders would take a few minutes to accomplish.

"Like a tourist, I wandered. I gawked at the Temple of Vesta. The Temple of Castor and Pollux. The Tabularium. And here, the Senate House. It kept hitting me, again and again: I was really here. I wasn't looking at ruins. I was seeing new buildings wearing fresh paint and old buildings lovingly kept young. I caught some young boys staring at me from the shadows, and I lifted my face plate to show them a pleasant smile. And then came the rough, rising sounds of engines, and they scattered, and I walked back over to Lucian, over near the rostra. And a few moments later, our entire air force came streaking over the heart of Rome, each one of the seaplanes pulling a long banner, every banner proclaiming in Latin:

"'Lucian rules the world.'

"We watched the planes pass overhead, and they turned and came back again, the whine of their motors kept intentionally loud.

"I was standing beside Lucian. Every time I looked at him, he was smiling. Beaming. All of those early jitters had dissolved, replaced with a giddy joy.

"Everything was perfect, I thought.

"'It's going to be great,' I mentioned to him.

"But then Lucian gave me a look, and still wearing that wild wide smile, he said, 'Okay, this is finished. This is done. What in the hell are we going to do now?'"

VI

Octavian is a smallish man in his early fifties. As a boy, he was genuinely frail, his body tortured by relentless troubles with his stomach; but as an adult, he has grown heavier and considerably healthier. He has a wise, certain mouth blessed with the finest dental work available. His eyes are gray and relentless, shining behind a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. Today, like most days, he wears the customary uniform of the emperor's court: Blue denim trousers and soft shoes tied with gold-tipped laces, plus a deceptively simple blouse made from the finest Chinese silks. A giant brown man stands on his right, holding a heavy red radio that will light up with any urgent news meant for the emperor. The radio is a standard precaution. On this day, thirty-three years after the Arrival, the empire is at peace with its neighbors and itself. Prosperity and the rule of Law hold sway everywhere. No force of nature or man can stand against Rome, and none dare to try.

"We conquered this city in a day," says the emperor, his voice quietly proud. "People were stunned by our appearance, by our powers. Many of the Senators had fled when Caesar was killed, but the stubborn ones and Mark Antony eventually arrived at the Forum. Lucian met with that delegation. Here, inside the Senate House. He made the rich men sit on the top bleachers, and through our translator, he explained that we had come from a place they could not imagine, and that we were gods, and that if they cooperated, perhaps, they would keep their wealth and some influence. 'But if you fight against me,' he promised, 'I will steal away your lands and your gold, and your slaves, and with my own hands, I will fling your miserable carcasses back to some horrible past when barbarians ruled the world!'

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"Antony listened carefully. He was a bully of a man, impulsive and unimaginative. But he forced himself to bow to Lucian and to the rest of us. 'I am your servant,' he lied. And then he put on a disguise and slipped out of Rome before evening, heading north toward Gaul and Caesar's old legions.

"On the second day, we secured Ostia and brought in the freight barges and unloaded them. On the third day, we sank the barges, creating a temporary wharf where our giant ships could dock. But most of us couldn't linger near Rome. We had an empire to subdue, and frankly, we were deliciously curious about this great young world."

Using her famous smile, Forrester's daughter remarks, "I would love to hear about those next weeks."

Colfax sips his fizzy sweet, and continues.

Octavian listens. He always pays strict attention to the emperor's stories, searching for a fresh detail or an offhand admission—any useful word to help him understand these travelers from a distant, lost future. But as he listens today, he finds his own clear memories of those days. Gaius Octavius Thurinus was an eighteen-year-old boy, a gifted student and Caesar's chosen heir. He was living across the Adriatic, in Illyricum, when word finally arrived of his great-uncle's assassination. It was a tragedy and a crime, but the murder was also an opportunity. What should he do? Advisors pressed close, offering every choice. Some argued that he should lead the Macedonian legions to Rome. But more cautious tongues told him to make the journey alone and unarmed, meeting his potential allies as well as his enemies before making any irrevocable moves.

The boy decided on caution. A seaworthy boat was acquired, and with his advisors and a few guards, Octavian set sail for the Italian peninsula. Rough seas hampered his progress, but by mid-voyage, the skies cleared. The men went out on deck to enjoy the sun and blue skies. It was Agrippa who noticed the winged apparition riding over the endless waves. Everyone heard the rumbling roar of the beast's lungs, and with a growing horror, they saw it dip its wings and move at them, streaking overhead with an arrow's speed.

Omens have weight and worth. The trouble comes in understanding the omen. Twice, the monster passed overhead, and then it turned and raced for the horizon. What did it mean? Octavian's friends and tutors debated the matter. Then, just as they convinced themselves that it was a favorable sign, a small hill appeared on the horizon. The hill quickly grew larger. They soon realized that it was a second apparition, pushing its way through the heavy seas: A great ship, judging by its appearance; but there were no oars flailing at the water, or square sails catching the wind.

Written on the bow, in simple white letters, was the Latin word:

VERITAS.

Truth.

Here was a monster sent by the gods. Some of the crew cried out to Neptune, for help or for mercy. A few leapt into the sea. In horror, Octavian watched the giant ship turn to port and slow, the water behind it filled with foam. Then a smaller vessel slipped away from the monster. It was low and bulky but moved with an astonishing speed, spitting water out of its rectum as it bore down on them. Perhaps a dozen gods were onboard, and one of them spoke with an enormous voice, using clumsy Latin to say, "We mean no harm. Is the boy Octavius with you? We wish to speak with him."

Suddenly, Octavian was a boy again. He was no longer an emperor-in-

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waiting, nor the chosen successor to Caesar, but he was an eighteen-year-old child trembling from simple terror.

One of Agrippa's soldiers choked down his own fears and leaped into the little boat as it pulled alongside. With a practiced violence, he brought his sword down on an exposed shoulder, but what looked like bulky fabric absorbed the impact without complaint. There wasn't time for a second blow. A second god pointed a piece of metal, and there was a powerful, staggering blast. Then the brave soldier's shoulder was split open, a thin rain of blood spattered on the wooden hull and the cowering faces above.

The gods climbed onboard. Two more explosions were sent skyward, in warning. Then the crew and passengers were lined up, and one god looked at each of them, comparing their faces to what he saw on a slick piece of paper.

The paper held the image of a marble bust.

Pointing at Octavian, he spoke in a foreign tongue. And he laughed. And then he actually bowed to his captive, using his sloppy Latin to say, "My name is Jack Forrester. I am here to invite you and your party to our ship."

The boy felt weak and scared, but he forced himself to speak. Quietly, he asked, "What if I refuse?"

Forrester was an imposing man, strong and amazingly youthful for someone forty years old. He could intimidate with a glower, but his green eyes and his open hands betrayed a genuine distaste for this kind of bullying work. "Then I will bind your hands and feet and carry you over," he remarked. "And if you put up too much of a fight, then I'm afraid Rome will have to live, or die, without your considerable talents."

"You were my idea," the emperor allows. He glances out at the shadows, and then remembering the cameras, he adds, "Octavian," for the benefit of future audiences. "My friend and trusted advisor. How long have we been together now?"

The man in denim trousers says nothing, but he shows his emperor a warm smile and bows at the waist.

"Ever since that great day in April," the old man continues. And then, he coughs. His narrow hand curls into a fist and covers his mouth, tired lungs wracked by a string of little explosions. Instantly, his doctors confer, checking the hour and his charts. A fat pink pill is removed from a jar and sent to the emperor through one of his servants, and like the good patient he is, Colfax picks up the medicine and swallows it along with the last of his fizzy sweet.

The emperor is tired, suddenly. Layers of makeup can no longer hide the hollowness beneath his eyes, and a familiar tremor begins in his left hand, his right hand plopping on top of it to keep it still.

Forrester's daughter watches him with an easy compassion. Using an apologetic tone, she asks, "Do you wish to continue?"

"Of course," he mutters.

She nods, asking, "What did you mean, your excellence? How was Octavian 'your idea'?"

One more cough is suffered. Then the man nods, throwing a fond glance at his associate. "Actually, I wasn't the first to make the suggestion. Forrester was. We were still college students, and he was our resident history major, and over a slice of pepperoni, he pointed out that we would eventually need advice from the natives. 'Advice, and sometimes more than advice,' he warned us.

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"'But we have history as our guide,' Lucian offered with a laugh.

"Forrester took a long sip of beer, shaking his head. Then he looked at me, not at Lucian; I suppose he sensed that Lucian wouldn't understand. 'History is a story,' he growled at me. 'It's a huge story told by millions, each with their own shifting interests, and there's nothing to be sure about. The books will be wrong, in little ways and big fat ones. And we're going to have to find help from someone who knows better.'"

Colfax pauses. Nods. "Once we decided on 44 BC, several voices mentioned Octavian. But I was the advocate who convinced Lucian. The future Augustus had skills and insights, I argued. History painted him as a rational man. He knew his people and their history, he understood the Senate, and if we weren't going to use him, we damn well should put him someplace where he couldn't harm us."

Octavian puts on a fond, respectful expression—a smile that isn't quite a smile—and again, he bows slightly at the waist, showing anyone watching his pleasure with this very narrow praise.

"Marcus took the *Justice* into the western Mediterranean, moving from port to port, showing the local authorities who was in charge. I took the *Truth* in an easterly cruise, on the same general mission. After some false leads, I found Octavian at sea, and I brought him and his companions to my ship, and I made my introductions, welcoming them as honored guests."

Again, the emperor stares out through the glare of hot lights. "You were sick as a boy. We knew this. So I had you taken straight to our sick bay, and the doctors found the ulcer, and they put you on a regime of antibiotics and vitamins. Bacteria typically cause ulcers. I explained this to you and your companions. At dinner that night, out on deck, under the open stars. My Latin's never been strong—I have no talent for languages—but I think we did an adequate job of communicating. Didn't we?"

Forrester's daughter squints into the darkness, feeling her control of the interview being stolen away.

"Come join us, Octavian! Please!"

The emperor wills it; the woman can do nothing but smile and say, "Yes. Come sit with us, Praetor. For a moment."

Octavian has no choice. He enters the pool of unnaturally bright light, sitting in the first chair provided, and he looks across the white table, bowing with his head, saying with his best American, "Your excellence. First among equals. It's my pleasure to serve."

The emperor coughs again, softly, using the moment to consider his next words. "I want, if I could, to apologize to you."

Genuinely baffled, Octavian asks, "For what?"

"Apollodorus," the emperor offers.

Forrester's daughter glances at both men. Then she admits, "I don't know the name. Who is he?"

"One of Octavian's tutors," the emperor allows. "A philosopher, and a brilliant man by most measures." He glances at his hands, spreading his fingers with palms flush against chill marble. "I enjoyed being the host. But I wanted to astonish my guests, too. So what I tried to do, quickly and simply, was explain how the universe works.

"I had a giant globe brought up on deck, and I showed it to everyone. The Roman Empire was a dark line drawn around a finger of blue water. Any man's hand would cover it up. I showed them the enormity of Asia and the continents they knew nothing about, and the unsuspected rivers and the

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endless seas. Then a telescope was brought up, and I showed them the planets and moon, and the stars, and I talked about the enormity of space and time. And then a chimpanzee was brought up. I had purchased it in Rome, from an animal dealer. Four years of college helped me explain evolution to my guests, and I gestured at the animal, claiming that it was their closest living relative. And then, finally, I had a microscope delivered, and I made each guest look at cultures made from Octavian's own sick belly. 'Every man is composed of tiny cells,' I explained, 'and each cell is enormous compared to the atoms that build both them and the farthest stars.'

"Quite the evening, I told myself. I was the wondrous host, and they were my spellbound guests. I was a little boy, smug with what he knows. I know I overplayed my hand. I know because Octavian's tutor couldn't bear this kind of knowledge. I was giving him a universe too vast and far too strange. Sometime that night, alone inside his cabin, he used a shard of glass, slicing his wrists and slowly bleeding to death.

"To save himself from demons, I suppose.

"Demons like me."

The emperor glances at Octavian, finally, smiling with a waxy sternness. "Is it a question of age?" he asks. "Or is it my illness? Whatever the reason, I seem to keep dwelling on things unseemly and sad."

VII

No one speaks. A nervous gloom takes hold of the Senate House. But then the woman uses her smile and coaxing charms, leaning toward her emperor. "My mother loves to tell about the first time she saw you," she purrs. "You and my father, and the *Veritas*."

Despite his mood, Colfax smiles.

"Your ship and little airplane caused a fantastic panic in Alexandria," she relates. "But then you came ashore beside our little lighthouse, with Forrester, and with Octavian. Your excellence, you couldn't have been more pleasant and respectful. Mother swears that you seemed genuinely humble, bowing to her, begging for permission to tour the Great Library."

"That was a beautiful, magical spring," the emperor remarks, closing his eyes and lifting a hand to his mouth, preparing to cough. But the cough fails. The hand drops into his lap, and he smiles again. "Every port of call was thick with history and awestruck crowds. There were administrators who needed to be frightened, and that was surprisingly fun. Plus there were rebels and assassins to be taken into custody. Brutus and Cassius. And Cicero. Proven troublemakers, and I was a busy god busily defending the future of Rome."

He pauses, smiling to himself. "My history books made me wary of your mother. But in the end, I allowed her to remain behind in Egypt. She convinced me and she convinced your father that she wanted only to help her people. She seemed to be a smart, creative person. Yes, the Great Library fascinated me. All those wonderful ancient parchments falling to dust. But Cleopatra was just as enthralled by the old books I had standing in heaps in my personal suite. Detective novels. Science texts. And particularly, the histories written two thousand years after her tragic death."

With a fond sigh, the emperor smiles down at his hands. "I returned to Rome," he continues. "Lucian had several hundred prisoners waiting in the

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city jails. Marcus sailed home the next day, straight from Gaul, carrying Mark Antony and a few ugly generals in his brig. The inner circle assembled for a quiet meeting onboard the *Virtue*. We sat inside Lucian's private suite and ate pizza and drank the last of our Budweiser, discussing our various prisoners. Their fates had been sealed long ago, but that evening, in air-conditioned comfort, we decided on their destination.

"Our prisoners were given a few bars of gold and put onboard a fleet of suddenly out-dated triremes. Their oarsmen were praetorians equipped for war. We put them to sea on a calm day, and Theresa brought the ChronoAble from its slumbers, and when it was fully charged and calibrated, Lucian took the controls. He showed us a smile and pressed the proper button, and moments later—with a fantastic flash of light—the fleet melted away.

"Until that instant, our Roman friends hadn't fully appreciated our powers. I remember looking over at Octavian. He wore a stunned expression, and despite the heat of the day, he shivered. Through my translator, I explained what had happened. My new friend listened, and then with his own broken American, he asked, 'Where are those men now?'

"Lucian overheard. He came right over and slapped Octavian on the shoulder, explaining in his loudest Latin, 'I sent those bastards back to just before Alexander's born.' Lucian was proud of himself. He was clever and just, and he wanted this chance to boast. 'It was my idea. I thought it would be fitting. Politicians and one of your best legions . . . with their brains and discipline, maybe they can help Rome conquer the world before that fag Greek gets his chance. . . !' "

Now the cough arrives, hard and wet. A cotton cloth is placed in the emperor's hand, and he coughs into it, wiping away the sputum and a thread of bright red blood.

Pausing, he collects his thoughts.

"I wonder about our species. I'm sure you have learned there are fossils buried in central Africa. They prove that our ancestors were a diverse collection of species slowly growing smarter. But then *Homo sapiens* emerge. A hundred thousand years ago, in a remote valley, we seem to pop into existence. And then we explode across the world, killing off every last one of our cousins. Which makes me wonder: Are we the descendants of a few political prisoners? Are we walking this earth before our time, set here before evolution could make us?"

He coughs, but only to clear his throat. Then he glances at Octavian, remarking with a cold surety, "We are a murderous species."

No one speaks.

The emperor continues to watch Octavian. "A week or two later, I think. There was a party in the main ballroom on the *Virtue*. Giant televisions had been set up in every corner. We were watching movies from my time. War movies, as it happens. Germans were driving across the borders. Not on horseback, but in Tiger tanks. But you didn't seem interested in the entertainment. A more immediate drama held your attention. Marcus and Lucian were drinking together, and talking, and you studied the two of them. I know that you couldn't have heard much, and I'm sure that your American wasn't that sharp. But you could read postures. You saw Marcus cut the air with his hand, and Lucian looked up at the ceiling, and winced. And then you turned to me, and with a calm, dark voice, you mentioned, 'I think the little man is going to be a problem for you. For us.' "

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VIII

A vigorous cough erupts, and trailing after the cough is a bleak little laugh ending with the muttered name, "Marcus."

Forrester's daughter sits forward in her chair, delicate elbows resting on the snowy marble.

"It was late that summer," the emperor remarks. "I was making a tour of the Po Valley, accompanying a team of our engineers and the best Roman architects. We wanted to build a small steel mill. Decisions had to be made; authority had to be wielded. That sort of humdrum. I didn't expect to see Marcus, but one afternoon, as my team and our guards drove along a dirt path, he just appeared. He was returning from Orange and a big distillery project. Coincidence crossed our paths. He said. I didn't say much, looking at him and his enormous entourage, and not for the first time, it occurred to me that his people—his best friends and advisors—had been with him since long before I ever met the man.

"He said, 'Jonathon! What a sweet piece of luck, running into you!'

"'How are you, Marcus?' I asked.

"'Great! Glorious! Hey, if you want . . . I've got a villa a few miles that way. Stay the night. You and your companions. Everyone.' Then he smiled, trying to charm me. 'I've got a feast waiting. And girls. And more girls, if you don't like the first batch.'

"'I'll eat,' I allowed. And that's what I did.

"At some point in the evening, we went outdoors and sat on folding chairs, watching the sun vanish behind the distant hills. It was the two of us, save for squads of soldiers standing out of earshot. I asked, 'How did you get this villa?'

"He said, 'Honestly, I don't remember. I've got so many of these marble shacks. . . .' Then he broke into a ridiculous giggle.

"I said nothing, waiting for his next words.

"'Are you having fun?' he asked. From his tone, I knew that he wasn't talking about just this particular moment. 'I just have to wonder,' he explained. 'When a person dreams of something for so long—something difficult and unique—well, it can be a disappointment to finally arrive and see the sharp reality of things. Know what I mean?'

"'I'm mostly happy,' I offered.

"'I thought so,' he responded. 'I usually have a good sense about people.'

"That wasn't true, but I didn't disagree with him.

"The fields belonged to Marcus. They were planted with old strains of wheat and newer hybrids of corn, and the wheat was in better shape. I couldn't tell if the people working the land were peasants or property. The distinctions are small, as it happens. I watched exhausted bodies marching back through the fields. Hungry, broken down people. My single comfort was in knowing that their children, or at least their grandchildren, would be freed from this sort of bone-breaking existence.

"'I worry,' Marcus confided.

"I glanced at him, measuring his face. Then I asked, 'About what?'

"'Lucian,' he said.

"I gave him silence and a speculative stare.

"With a smirk, Marcus shook his head. 'Our good friend doesn't like ruling an empire. Not like he should.' The little man paused, pretending to wince. 'I hate to say it. I do. But he's bored. Bored and distracted. Things just aren't

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exciting enough for him. And don't get me wrong—I like the exciting life, too. But three girls and a pitcher of wine make me happy. And I'll show up the next morning and decide matters of policy, issues of state.'

"I nodded in a noncommittal fashion. 'Lucian is fine,' I offered.

"'He's bored,' Marcus repeated. 'You must have noticed.'

"I was noticing many things. Again, I nodded. And then with a troubled voice, I asked, 'What should we do? Do you have a plan?'

"Marcus gave me a little sideways look, using his clumsy, overdone smile. Then with an overly loud voice, he claimed, 'I don't have any plans. I just think this is something to discuss. You know. Calmly and rationally? Like the two statesmen that we are. . . ?!'"

They have just entered unmapped terrain. Until now, the machinations of the inner circle have belonged to rumor and conjecture. Forrester's daughter is openly, fervently pleased, sitting back in her chair, allowing herself a moment of self-congratulation. Then to avoid teasing the Fates, she leans forward again, using a calm, understanding voice to profess, "This is all fascinating."

"Fascinating," the emperor repeats. Then he grins, shrugging his shoulders and confessing, "To me, it's drab. Ugly and petty and drab."

She won't hear of that. "Your excellence," she blurts. "I know it's not my place to force you to reveal anything. But this is an important subject. It is common knowledge that Marcus attempted a coup against Lucian. Did he enlist others from the inner circle? Or was it his doing alone?"

"No," says the emperor. "And no."

Her face tightens, and in the next moment, relaxes.

"There was no coup," he professes.

"Not a successful one," she counters.

"I mean there was no coup. Nothing that dramatic or effective, certainly." He appears frustrated, with her or with his own careless tongue. Placing his spidery hands on the tabletop, the sleeves of his toga pulled up, revealing his thin waxy wrists. "I finished my inspection tour and returned to Rome, and when I saw Lucian again—when it was just the two of us—I mentioned my conversation with Marcus. Lucian's reaction was laughter. He laughed and shook his head, and I did the same, and it felt genuine. And then my friend put a hand on my shoulder, and quietly, he confided, 'This isn't the first time that I've heard rumblings about that man.'

"I was disappointed. I had assumed that I was the first one approached by the conspirator. Evading my own pettiness, I told Lucian, 'What he said is stupid. I mean, look at you. Sitting in the Basilica Julia, presiding over your subjects . . . shit, you're doing exactly what you've always wanted to do. . . !'

"'My born calling,' he added, and we both enjoyed a good long laugh at Marcus's expense."

The journalist nods amiably, but a flicker of doubt shows itself.

"There was no coup," the emperor repeats. "Coups are extravagant. They require organization and treachery, and Marcus didn't have enough of either." He pauses, sighing softly. "No, the pure, ugly truth is that this was a family squabble. It was bad blood and small feelings, and Marcus didn't have any chance."

He sighs, and sighs.

"The fights began after that," he remarks. "Their battles were mostly private. I saw only one or two of the minor blow-ups. Theresa was the best wit-

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ness. When Lucian was traveling, she'd visit me at my residence. She was usually upset. When she cried, that intelligent face of hers aged ten years. I could see the pain, and I'd make some glancing mention of Marcus, and she would shake her head and sob, telling me, 'That little jerk has to be difficult. He has to complain about everything.'

"'What doesn't he like?' I asked.

"'Everything,' she repeated, as if the specifics were too obvious to repeat, or too dangerous. 'Marcus doesn't have the right,' she would grumble. 'I don't care if he was our bank. We don't need his help anymore, and we don't deserve his damned opinions.'

"'What does Marcus want?' I pressed.

"'He says we're too civilized. We've allowed too many natives to keep their land and wealth. Troublemakers need to be killed, he says. Not launched into some other time. Romans understand a sword through the heart, and he says that if we aren't sufficiently brutal, we're going to lose everything.'"

The emperor glances at Octavian.

"You were absolutely right," he adds. "That little man was trouble for us. I knew it then, and eventually the rest felt the same. Inside the inner circle, I mean. We'd been together for nearly twenty years, planning and sacrificing. I don't think Marcus understood how isolated he was from us. We became adults together, and he was the newcomer. Any bored billionaire would have worked as well as him, or better. That's what we decided, during our first winter and into the next spring. Marcus was a spoiled little boy, and he was trouble, and eventually something was going to have to be done about it."

He turns to the cameras. "We still kept meeting for pizza. Every month, on a scheduled night, we'd converge at someone's mansion on the Palatine Hill, or if Lucian didn't want to leave home, we came onboard his ship. We drank Roman wine and our latest beers and ate pizza made with the first tomatoes grown on the European continent, and we shared gossip and scraps of gossip, and of course, we spent a lot of time and beery breath making fun of our colleague.

"Really, this couldn't be any more trivial of a story.

"It was March. We had been here for a few days less than a year. It was a beautiful, surprisingly warm evening in a city that was increasingly ours, and we were standing outside my house—Cicero's old residence—and Emperor Lucian looked down at the rooftops and shook his head. Then he said, 'He isn't happy, you know. And he's going to get angrier and more embarrassing as time passes.'

"We didn't have to ask who he meant.

"'He has helped us,' Lucian reminded us. 'With his money and his energy, he's been a huge help. But I think we should talk about changes. Because the man just isn't happy here.'

"I was a little drunk. I laughed and said, 'Maybe we should send him home again.'

"Lucian turned, and with most of his face, he smiled. But not his eyes. His eyes were bright and cold, never blinking.

"I winced, shoulders dropping to my ribs.

"Then with a bellowing voice, he told everyone, 'I have a generous offer for our colleague. But I won't go alone. Everyone is with me, or this isn't worth doing.' Then he showed us his wide, winning smile, asking, 'Who's coming?'

"All of us were, of course.

"Just like that, we were marching together, our guards keeping close. It

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was late at night. Even the Palatine wasn't electrified yet, and that's why we carried flashlights. En masse, we marched over to Marcus's home and pounded on his gold-encrusted door. One of Marcus's drinking buddies opened it, finding us waiting. 'Bring us the little man,' Lucian cried out. And a few moments later, blinking and scratching his rumpled hair, Marcus looked out at our flashlights, asking, 'What do you want?'

"'You're not happy,' the emperor told him, sounding more drunk than he really was. 'We know that, and I know you think you can do better than me. Hey, Mark . . . don't interrupt me, buddy. Listen! You keep your ship. Take the *Justice*. Find a crew and take all the supplies you can carry, and give me a date. It's your choice, buddy. Name a year, and I'll put you there, and you can have your own world to conquer.'

"Then Lucian threw an arm around Marcus, dragging him out in front of us. The little man was in shock. Stupefied. He couldn't move or speak, nearly weeping as the emperor said with a clear, strong voice, 'When have you ever heard a more charitable, big-hearted deal?

"'How can you even think of refusing me?'"

Colfax pauses. Sweat seeps through his makeup, rolling across his scalp and down his weary face.

"Lucian gave Marcus three weeks to make his preparations. Any longer, he argued, and the plebeians would get wind of our troubles. We tried keeping the event secret from our servants and advisors. I didn't mention it to you until afterward, Octavian. Although as I recall, when I did finally tell you, you didn't seem very surprised by the news.

"Marcus decided to jump back fifteen months, appearing before we arrived here. A new timestream would erupt. His timestream. Marcus loved Rome, and now that he knew its language and politics, he convinced himself that he would prosper here without our help.

"But he ended up with a skeleton crew of followers, fleshed out—so to speak—with a few girlfriends. Even some lifelong friends didn't relish the idea of taking on Rome by themselves. He had a few guns and our most worn-out seaplane, and maybe half the boxes in the cargo hold were filled with ballast, not machinery. I didn't hear about that particular cheat until later. If I'd known . . . well, I probably wouldn't have complained. Marcus was abandoning us, and he was taking a third of our navy, and so yes, maybe I would have approved of Lucian's little deceptions.

"But the rest of the story . . . well, I would have been uncomfortable, and ill, and I probably would have raised my voice. . . . "

He pauses.

"I saw them talking," he continues. "Lucian and Theresa were arguing. We were at sea, following the *Justice* toward that wet spot where we appeared in this world. Lucian barked orders as I walked into their suite, and Theresa turned and saw me, and I saw she was crying, and she straightened her back and remembered to wipe at her eyes, telling me, 'It's nothing. It'll be fine. Can you move please, Jonathon?'

"I stepped out of the doorway, and when she was past me, I asked Lucian, 'What's wrong?'

"He looked at me. He didn't react immediately. Instead, he strolled over to his favorite recliner and sat and stretched out. He was tanned and fit and perfectly happy. With a remote control, he turned on the enormous television at the end of the room, and he said, 'Sit, Mr. Colfax. Sit and watch.'

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"Marcus and his ship were churning across the water. The images were being piped down from a camera on top of the *Virtue*'s bridge. I sat in the middle of a long sofa and looked at the screen, remarking, 'He's still got a few miles to go.'

"'I'm not waiting that long,' Lucian confessed.

"I didn't know what to say. I just nodded and looked at the screen, thinking that it really didn't matter. Marcus could be roaring along at full speed, and it wouldn't disrupt his jump into the past.

"Lucian panned the camera downward. The ChronoAble was perched on the superstructure, never looking more like a piece of artillery. Theresa and her people were hard at work. I saw her gesture. I saw her shout at someone, which was peculiar.

"Then the machine gave out a thousand little sputters and sparks: It was making its calibrations. We had to guarantee that the travelers arrived at the proper altitude. But the calibration business was taking longer than I had ever seen, and I mentioned it to Lucian.

"He said nothing.

"I asked, 'Are we having trouble with the machine?' It wasn't supposed to wear out for a hundred years, but what good was the warranty here? 'What's it looking for? The sea's the same height as it was last year.'

"Amiably, he said, 'Yes, it is the same.'

"I turned, looking at Lucian's handsome, grinning face. He was enthralled. He was wearing the same great smile that had lit up the dormitory room when we were freshmen. Spellbound and proud of himself, he gave out a peculiar little laugh. Then he said, 'I haven't told anyone yet. Not even Theresa knows.'

"I swallowed, and I waited, holding my breath somewhere under my stomach.

"'I just figured something out,' Lucian confessed. "Just a month ago or so, it came to me. Finally, I know what my true calling is.'

"'Your calling?' I blurted. 'It's Rome, isn't it?'

"'Rome is a resource,' he replied. 'A raw material.'

"I asked, 'What's that mean?'

"But he refused to enlighten me. Instead, he said, 'Watch,' as the camera returned to the *Justice*. Marcus kept churning his way through the blue waters. Lucian bent forward and hit a flashing red button on a nondescript control panel, and a moment later, a bright blast of light tore open a new doorway in our present.

Suddenly, our instant led into a distant instant. Delicate sensors designed and built by never-born physicists analyzed that unique flash of light, filtering and scrubbing the data, searching for the occasional photon that happened to leak through that very temporary doorway. A picture was built. In moments, a grainy photograph showed me where Lucian had sent Marcus and the other traitors: I saw a cold gray sea tossed by waves, and great sheets of snow falling from a leaden sky.

"I blurted out, 'When is this?'

"Calmly, happily, Lucian told me, 'Eighteen thousand years ago.'

"I looked at him.

"'In winter,' he added.

"I looked away.

"'If the man can survive,' he remarked, 'imagine all the remarkable futures that I have just given wings to. . . !'"

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IX

The perspiration worsens. Emotion or a fever is to blame. Either way, this is a warning sign, a cause for concern, and the ground rules for the interview are explicit. Forrester's daughter glances at the physicians, who look at Octavian, begging for orders. He nods, giving permission. Then the interview is suspended while ancient thermometers are placed inside the emperor's ears, each wrist held gently while the pulse is counted. Colfax is a compliant, mostly indifferent patient. Like many of the chronically ill, he has learned how to surrender his body to other hands.

"There is a fever," one of the physicians confesses. "We should stop for today, and wait—"

"No," the emperor says. "Not now."

The ranking physician looks at Octavian. "Sire, I don't recommend taxing him anymore."

Octavian nods and begins to rise.

"I said no," Colfax erupts, yanking his wrists free of the clinging hands. "Mop my forehead. Fix my face. But I want to finish this business. Now!"

"As you wish," a dozen voices mutter.

"And take your seat, my friend. You belong to these events. You saw what I saw, to one degree or another."

"Then I shall, your excellence."

The doctors retreat, and a squad of makeup specialists descend in their place, working quickly to dry and patch, leaving a face that mostly resembles the public image of the man. More drinks arrive, ice water and a fizzy sweet. A long pile of pills is set between the glasses, and the emperor picks through them, selecting a narrow white tablet that he downs with an artful little sip.

He coughs, but with vigor.

"A few weeks later," he continues, "Lucian left Rome on an extended cruise. We had planned the event years ago. The new emperor would tour his empire, admiring its beauties while allowing his subjects to see him. Lucian was a living god, and we would play on that angle to a shameful degree." He glances at Octavian. "The truth is, we took our cue from the great Augustus. Deification of the leader is an ancient, honorable tradition, particularly in the eastern provinces. We were going to marry that impulse to modern tricks—grand speeches delivered to packed coliseums, propaganda films shown at night in outdoor amphitheaters, and glorious new shrines built to honor a god who had traveled two thousand years to help a great people.

"I stayed in Rome. With Forrester, and with most of the inner circle, I began our sprint to the modern world. The first new schools were built, the new generation learning about science and the zero and aluminum and the internal combustion engine. The aqueduct system was married to crude turbines, producing enough electricity to keep the main streets lit at night. Rome had always been such a dark, dangerous lady after nightfall, and we helped change that. Traditional blood sports were banned, or at least minimized, and then to keep our public entertained, I sacrificed a dozen of our precious Hum-vees, racing them inside the great Circus Maximus. Plus, I opened medical clinics and green-lighted the crash production of penicillin and smallpox vaccines, and that's why before our second winter, we were saving more lives than all the other gods of this land combined.

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"Lucian and Theresa returned to Rome in the winter.

"He was fit and happy, and as much as any man I'd ever seen, he was gorgeous. The light inside him—that beatific glow that I'd first seen twenty years before, in our dormitory room—was always present now. He smiled relentlessly. When he spoke, he seemed to be singing, his rich voice falling from some lofty, infinitely more important place. But Lucian preferred long silences and dreamy stares, those giant black eyes glittering in whatever light happened to grace them.

"Theresa was the opposite. She was middle-aged, and tired. She had gained weight in the last months. Her eyes were perpetually bloodshot. Her skin was suffering some tropical rash that wasn't responding to medication or any priest's incantations. I know she wasn't sleeping. She told me as much. She even admitted that she and Lucian were having troubles. Her phrasing and the sad nodding of her head made me believe another woman was involved. Or more than one, perhaps. Then after a weary little gasp, she added, 'I'm just glad to be home. At least for a few months.'

"'What happens in a few months?' I asked. 'Where are you going?'

"She nearly spoke. But she caught herself, and she conjured up a ghostly little smile.

"'No,' Theresa told me. 'God Himself should tell you this news.'"

A pause. A fist rises to stifle a cough that never comes, and then the emperor opens the fist to reveal a tiny yellow pill that he swallows without water.

"We met here," he says softly. "Julius Caesar had begun the remodeling of the Senate House, and I finished it, with help from his own architects. Lucian thought this was an appropriate venue. He invited our inner circle and maybe a hundred other time travelers, plus the surviving Senators and our best Roman friends. You were there, Octavian. You had mastered our language, which meant you listened to Lucian's speech twice. A few sentences of American, and then a few sentences of Latin. And of course, cameras recorded everything, saving this historic, perfect moment for the ages.

"Lucian was full of himself. I saw that, and really, it didn't bother me. I was loyal enough, even then, that I could embrace what I adored and ignore the rest. Let him be God, just leave the rest of us to manage his empire . . . hadn't that been the plan from the beginning. . . ?

"It was a fine, competent speech, and it was uninspired.

"Lucian was too confident, I suppose. Too self-absorbed and cocksure. He began with photographs just brought from Greece. One of the new temples was nearing completion. In its essentials, it matched our original plans. Marble columns formed the walls of a crescent-shaped building. The building occupied a wide plaza, and at its center stood a large statue of Lucian standing beside a jewel-encrusted time machine. But when the perspective turned, following Lucian's stony gaze . . . well, that's when my heart kicked and my belly ached.

"The temple looked across the Aegean. Down by the water's edge, at some considerable expense, workmen had erected a new shipyard. I counted six caravels in various stages of completion, with berths for perhaps fifty more. Beside the ships stood newly built shops and apartments and stacks of green lumber and empty pens waiting for livestock. A thousand rumors suddenly turned real. I took a deep, useless breath and held it. Forrester was sitting beside me. He looked disgusted, and angry.

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"What do you think?' I muttered. He looked at me and said nothing. Then I turned and found my associate sitting among his fellow Romans. Your expression, Octavian . . . if I may say it, you looked astonishingly calm, absorbing this revelation with a very public grace. But by then, I knew you. With a glance, I saw that you were at least as appalled as I was.

"Lucian stood beneath the projected images. With the happiest of voices, he explained, 'I came to Rome with a simple mission. I would make it modern, and I would make it powerful, and if my descendants wished, they could conquer this entire world.' He repeated himself in seamless Latin. 'But then I saw an even simpler mission,' he continued, in American. 'Why aim for a single world when you can embrace millions? Why stop with this earth when a trillion others are free for the picking?'"

X

Colfax sips at his fizzy sweet, resting now.

Octavian interrupts the peace. With a careful voice, he says, "Your excellence," and tips his head. "If I might, your excellence. May I ask a question of you?"

Forrester's daughter bristles.

But the emperor seems genuinely pleased, a wide smile building as he wonders, "What do you wish to know, my friend?"

"You were well aware of Lucian's plans. I had heard a few stories, but you knew the crew of the *Virtus*. They must have seen everything and talked about it. How, if I may ask, could you be taken by surprise?"

"But I was surprised," the emperor confesses. "By the scale of the venture, yes. A small temple, a few volunteers . . . well, that's what I'd imagined. But when I realized that Lucian intended to send many thousands of people into the past—"

"From a single temple," Octavian interrupts.

A murmur passes through the audience. No one can remember the man ever interrupting his emperor.

But Colfax doesn't act offended. He shrugs his shoulders, and he sighs, remarking, "How long had I been with Lucian? How many opportunities did I have to stand against him? But I was loyal, even then. Particularly then. Afterward, Forrester met with me, in private. 'I didn't come for this kind of bullshit,' he confessed. 'Our living god is spending fortunes and accomplishing nothing for this world!'

"But I just shook my head, telling him, 'It won't amount to much. Really, how many people are going to willingly throw away the present?'"

Colfax pauses.

Octavian straightens his back, and waits.

"In the spring, Lucian began another voyage around the Mediterranean. At each new temple, the priests would load the caravels and second-hand triremes, and in some cases, the crudest of rafts. The people onboard were farmers and craftsmen, slaves and prisoners. Some came willingly, but oftentimes the new priests would lie and manipulate, or simply use the local soldiers to enforce compliance. Lucian had goals. In secret, he had drawn up explicit timetables and quotas, and if those goals were met, a temple's priests stood to gain huge expanses of land, and gold, and monopolies in one of a thousand new industries.

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"It was said that if the *Virtue* appeared on your horizon in the morning, by nightfall, the population of your district would have fallen by a full tenth."

Another pause.

The woman leans forward, blurting, "You couldn't have realized—"

Octavian grasps her by the wrist and squeezes until she falls silent again. Then he says, "Your excellence." His voice is precise and a little slow, fighting to hide his emotions. "You knew what was happening. You knew. Yet months passed before you responded."

"Absolutely true, and the blame is entirely my own."

No one speaks. Save for the mechanical whirr of the cameras, the Senate House is immersed in a rigid silence.

The emperor glances at the woman, admitting, "I can't blame my friendship with Lucian. By and large, that friendship was finished. I saw him rarely, and when we were together, he was arrogant and indifferent to me. What I could blame, if I wished, was my deep love for the man. Unlike friendship, love is resilient and foolish. Fifty years have passed since I met him, yet I still feel a powerful affection for that swaggering, enthralling creature."

He pauses, shaking his head with an old embarrassment. "But no, I'm not blaming love, either. My excuse is simpler, and sorrier." He looks at Octavian, and with a confession's tone, he admits, "In some fashion, I believed in Lucian's vision. I lay awake at night, imagining a million earths colonized with my help. Tough peasants and lucky slaves were being thrown back into essentially empty worlds, and if only a fraction of those colonies thrived, think of the legacy. A legacy worthy of gods, I should think."

Forrester's daughter feels forgotten. She sits back and holds her tongue, those dark, bewitching eyes staring at an empty point between the two men.

The emperor continues. "Lucian and the *Virtue* left that spring. With Theresa and the ChronoAble, of course. They sailed from port to port, temple to temple, and at each stop, would-be colonists would come onto the water in whatever boats were available. To save wear and tear on the time machine, calibrations were kept to a minimum. Lucian would stand on his ship's bow and wish the travelers a safe voyage, and he would hit the switch, and then more wooden ships would sail out. Of course, few of those travelers were sailors, and no one had experience with caravels. But, in theory, they were dropped into calm seas near old shorelines. Theresa worked doggedly to keep the travelers safe. She studied geologic texts and begged for more calibrations, and sometimes Lucian relented. Sometimes. But there were days when he grew bored with delays and the clumsy sailors that could never quite get their ships into position. He would pick some random instant in the past and start firing at each single boat. Without warning, colonists were flung back to the same ancient day. Five thousand years ago. Forty thousand years ago. Or more. Of course each firing of the ChronoAble produced an independent timestream. With chickens and a few sheep, plus all of the tools they could carry, those hardy souls were flung into some younger, unspoiled earth.

"Our sensors absorbed the flashes, then scrubbed them for data, building snapshots of the past. Most of the images seemed harmless enough. A ship sat on a slightly different sea, and you couldn't guess as to whether or not those colonists had survived the day. But one of Theresa's technicians would

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pass me evidence of disasters. Sometimes the colonists were tossed in raging storms. Or they were in the middle of a landless sea, no clue as to which way to safety. And once, there was an old trireme filled with Spaniards, and the image showed the boat and oars and the seawater that came with it, and beneath that disk of warm summer water was air. Their trireme burst into existence maybe a hundred feet above the ocean. The calibrations were wrong, and the poor bastards didn't have a chance . . . good strong men rowing maybe once before they felt themselves tumbling from the sky. . . . "

Octavian bristles but says nothing.

"A sad waste," the emperor concedes. "But on the other hand, weren't we spreading medicines and education through the empire? Given time, we would double the average lifespan, and personal wealth would increase tenfold, and even if Lucian sent half of our people into the past . . . well, wouldn't the other improvements make up for those losses and smooth away all those little tragedies. . . ?"

He shakes his head, and coughs, and coughs again.

Octavian interrupts, saying a name.

He says, "Forrester," with a genuine fondness. Then he mentions, "Late that year, you took the man to Egypt."

"There was trouble there, yes." The emperor nods and glances at the daughter, explaining, "We tried to be careful. When we were planning our conquest, we tried to find people without strong Christian beliefs. But maybe a hundred of us had lied. Or maybe they'd found their old faith when they arrived here. Either way, they slipped away from us and converged on the Holy Land. They began preaching about the Son of God, predicting that He would arrive in a few decades to make a kingdom on Earth. . . .

"Well, that was a sordid, ugly mess to deal with, and I think that your father did a commendable job rounding up the preachers and their converts."

Again, Octavian says, "You took Forrester to Egypt."

"He needed a base camp in a place he could trust. He had his own troops, plus Cleopatra's army fitted with muskets and napalm. That's when he and your mother began their affair, of course. That's when they fell in love, and it *was* love, I think. For your father, I know it was.

"Afterward, I took my own little cruise around the eastern Mediterranean. I visited the new temples and the empty lands surrounding them. Empty of people, and empty of trees. And where there were people, they were slaving in the sun, cutting down the last little stands of forest, making ready for the next awful spring when Lucian would come again.

"I saw all that, and then I came home.

"It was early morning when I docked. Exhausted, I returned to my home on the Palatine, and I soaked in my bath, and I drank too much, and then I came out to find my associate sitting in my home office." He turns to Octavian. "You were studying, if I recall. You had a CD in the reader, and you were reading Gibbon. I remember that much. But honestly, I can't recall what I said to you."

Octavian waits for a moment, and then says, "'It's all shit,' you said. 'Everything's turning to shit.'"

"'That sounds about right," says Colfax.

"'What can we do about this fucking mess?' you asked."

"And you told me what to do," the emperor says.

"I merely advised," Octavian counters. Then for the first time, he glances at the cameras, adding, "For the good of Rome, what else could I do?"

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XI

The emperor's gaze returns to the woman, and he says nothing, studying her face while his own face slips from emotion to emotion. One instant, he grins. The next brings a wince and a sad shiver. Then he takes a deep breath, and with a calm, practiced voice, he tells her, "When I agreed to this interview, I asked for you. I demanded you. If you weren't available, I wouldn't be here now."

She nods and smiles. "I could never refuse a request from you, your excellence."

"Your work is absolutely vital," he continues.

She can't help but smile, muttering, "Thank you, your excellence."

"How many film forums have I built?" he asks.

"More than a thousand," she guesses. "In just Rome, there must be at least twenty of them."

"And you appear in the newsreels. Your face and voice deliver timely news from the frontiers in Britain and the center of Rome." He shows her a wide smile, saying, "Thank you. I wanted to tell you thank you. More than most, you've helped build us into a modern state."

She can't contain her pleasure, her emperor's praise washing over her, buoying up her spirits and her already high confidence.

Then the emperor's face stiffens and grows cold.

Firmly, slowly, he says, "It has always been a subject of conjecture: Who turned Lucian against your father? Every member of the inner circle has been named at one time or another. His own soldiers are suspects. And of course, our Roman advisors. Octavian is an obvious candidate. He has eyes. He has ears. He possesses an absolute, perfect shrewdness that lets him weigh rumors, picking out the chaff from what is genuine.

"It could have been Octavian. But if you believe that, you have to assume that Lucian would have listened to him, and believed him, and acted on those beliefs.

"As a point of fact, Lucian never had fondness or trust for Romans.

"Really, if you're listing suspects, only two qualify. Unless we include your own father, too."

He pauses, sipping at the air with quick little breaths.

The daughter begins to speak, her mouth falling open but her words stopped short by the emperor's sudden admission:

"I visited Lucian. I took a set of files filled with evidence, some of it genuine but most of it fabricated. Lucian was on his ship. He never actually lived in Rome itself. His private suite had been enlarged, walls knocked out to form an enormous room with bullet-proof windows on all sides and sliding doors leading out onto an equally enormous balcony. I found him indoors, sitting at a desk, poring over a stack of poster-sized photographs.

"'Just a moment,' he said, not looking up.

"He knew I was coming. He knew I was standing behind his left shoulder. But it was important to keep me waiting for a while, treating me with a calculated indifference.

"Finally, he said, 'Here. Come here, Jonathon.'

"I approached, pushing the files tight up under my arm.

"'I'm picking images for my forum,' he reported, grinning down at the posters. 'I want your input here. What do you think? This one, or that?'

"His forum was being built behind the Senate House. It was an expensive,

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graceless crash program—a showcase for his conquest of countless earths. One image showed a trireme sitting in a flat tropical sea, and standing in that water, not fifty feet away, was the long neck and tiny, toothy head of a plesiosaur.

"'Spectacular, isn't it?' he exclaimed.

"But the other image was stranger. A pair of caravels had appeared in the surf of an ancient sea, and in the foreground, strolling stupidly along the rocky beach, was a burly animal that looked like a reptile in one glance, a mammal in the next.

"'Permian?' I sputtered.

"'Very good! Exactly!' Lucian had a giggle, winking at me. 'You know, honestly, I think I'll use them both. Blown up bigger than this. Wall-sized and set in places of prominence.'

"He'd already made that decision. He just needed to enjoy my surprise and my horror.

"What would happen to those people? I nearly asked. How could they survive, lost in an entirely different world? It seemed cruel, and it was definitely wasteful, and normally I would have said a few careful words. But I had more pressing business. With both hands, I dropped the file on his desk, and in the next breath, I told him, 'Forrester is against us.'

"Lucian laughed. Dismissing me, he said, 'I know his complaints. I hear them. Hell, he's even told me his mind—'

"'No,' I interrupted. 'I mean, he is actively plotting against us.'

"'What? Is my general going to march on Rome?' Lucian pushed the file to one side, informing me, 'I know the man. I know his opinions and his tendencies, and he's not that fucking complicated. Or treacherous, for that matter.'

"And I knew Lucian. Better than anyone else, I knew that I had to wait for a long moment, giving my old friend time to consider the situation. He knew me. And he slowly, slowly realized that I wouldn't have come if I didn't believe that I had a very good reason.

"He took a deep breath and pulled the file close again.

"'What's here?' he asked.

"'Taped conversations,' I allowed. 'My notes. And some security reports from Egypt and Jerusalem.'

"Then he turned to me, asking with force, 'What will they tell me?'

"'It's not a coup,' I explained. 'You're right. Forrester would never.' Then I shook my head sadly, reporting, 'It's your time machine, Lucian. He only wants to blow it up.'"

Colfax closes his eyes, and opens them.

The daughter of the accused sits bolt upright, motionless, her mouth ajar, a whispering gasp leaking from deep inside her throat.

He continues. "Within the hour, the *Virtue* was being readied for sea. But it would take three days and nights to finish fueling and load the necessary supplies. On that third night, I had an unannounced visitor. She came alone, no bodyguards in sight. I told her, 'You shouldn't be out there. It's dangerous,' and she said, 'So let me inside,' and she stepped through my door and pulled the hood off her head, showing me her puffy face and swollen, bloodshot eyes.

"I motioned, saying, 'Let's go to the garden. We can talk there.'

"I had a servant bring us fizzy sweets, and I sat her down beside a granite

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fountain, letting the water sounds obscure our voices. 'Theresa,' I said. Then I shook my head sadly. And finally, after so many years, I asked her, 'Do you know how jealous I was? When I got home that day, and I walked in on you and Lucian. . . ?'

"It took her by surprise, that confession. She was startled, off-balance. But then something in my voice or words found purchase inside her. Theresa shook her head, and tenderly, she asked me, 'Why haven't you ever married, Johnny?'

"I shrugged and smiled shyly. I could have told her that I hadn't found the right girl, or that it wouldn't have been fair to bring a wife on such a risky adventure. I could have claimed that my romance for Rome meant that I had to marry one of its daughters. Any of those responses would have been truthful, to a point. But I smiled at her and said, 'It's you. I've always loved you, and there's nobody else for me.'

"As if she had never seen me before, she stared at me then.

"'Do you mean that?' she asked.

"I said, 'Yes.' And I said it convincingly, my voice helped along by the fact that it was a little true.

"Theresa dipped her head, and sighed, and then I asked, 'Why are you here?'

"Why was she? She seemed to have forgotten. She shook her head, collecting her wits. Then she spoke to the stone path at her feet, saying, 'Now Forrester is against us.'

"'No, he isn't,' I replied, instantly.

"Then I told her the details of my elaborate and very dangerous lie.

"I expected her to be surprised and outraged. If she was either, the emotions remained hidden. She looked at her hands. She looked at my feet. Then with a great wet breath, she looked above my head, asking, 'Why would you do that to our good friend?'

"I said nothing.

"'Lucian is going to send him off,' she warned. 'He's been talking about nothing else for days.' She shivered. She sobbed. Her gaze dropped again. 'How can you let this happen to our friend?'

"But I'm not letting anything happen,' I pointed out. 'You are.'

"Then I leaned forward, cupping her hands in mine, pressing my mouth against my love's ear. 'Darling,' I whispered. 'If you don't want it to happen, it won't happen. That's the simple, awful truth, darling.'"

XII

Exhaustion softens the old man's voice. The boom above him has to lower its bulbous microphone to capture every word. The technicians quietly gather beside one of the cameras, working at some critical problem. But there is no mention of stopping. If the cameras die now, and if the lights fail, the audience will sit in the sudden darkness, waiting for whatever the emperor says next.

"Your father surprised me," he confesses. "When Lucian arrived in Alexandria, he had Forrester brought onboard and escorted to his suite, and he confronted him with my lying files. 'Why do this to me?' he roared. And when Forrester didn't respond, he asked, 'Are you going deny all this evidence?'

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"Forrester was in uniform, but unarmed. He examined the transcripts and fondled the various tapes, and then with a calm, clear voice, he said, 'No, it's true. All true.'

"Lucian was furious. He shook his head, tugged at his hair, and then with a loud, piercing voice, he screamed, 'Do you know where I'm going to send you? Do you? Back when the earth was new, you son-of-a-bitch! Before there was air. Before the crust got cold! Hell! That's where I'm sending you! Hell!'

"Forrester just grinned, and with a little shake of his head, he remarked, 'It's a good thing that you're a god, because you're not much of a man.'

"Lucian barked orders, and bodyguards led the prisoner away.

"Then he sat down on his yellow sofa, and he said to me, 'It looks like you were right, Jonathon.'

"I had followed Lucian to Alexandria. It was on my own authority, against his orders. But when I reached him in the harbor, I explained my reasons. If one of his oldest advisors was against him, then I had to play a role here. If only to watch justice happen, I needed to be present—as a witness and as a counter to any future criticisms from the others in our increasingly tiny circle.

"'Are you glad you came?' he barked.

"'When will you send him?' I asked. 'Today?'

"'This fucking minute,' he proclaimed. Then he called to the guards on the intercom, giving them clear orders. And he turned on the big television, calling up to Theresa and her technicians. 'Don't bother with calibrations!' he warned. 'Four and a half billion years ago! Make it happen now!'

"The unrepentant prisoner was led to the great ship's bow. He was scared, but stubborn. Perspiration was leaking through his uniform. I saw him squint at the bright subtropical sun. He looked up at the superstructure, at the watching camera, and he shook his head for a moment. Then with a massive dose of will, he laughed at us, his cowardly, pathetic audience.

"'Are we ready?' Lucian asked.

"A voice answered. Not Theresa's, but another technician's voice. 'We're having trouble powering up—' she began.

"'Is there enough juice?' he roared.

"'Barely,' she allowed.

"'Fine. I'll send him in pieces, if I have to.'

"Lucian had a control panel built into the coffee table. Like ten thousand times in the past, he put his hand on the flashing red button, and he pushed, and there was a flash of quick cold light that filled the television screen for a horrible moment.

"When the light dissolved, Forrester was still standing on the deck. Still squinting and shaking his head.

"I didn't say a word.

"Lucian seemed to forget I was there. He called up to Theresa again. He said her name, maybe three times. Then she finally answered, a quiet little voice saying, 'Yes.'

"'Something's wrong with something,' Lucian raged.

"'I know, darling,' she replied.

"'Fix it,' he told her.

"She said, 'No.'

"'Why not?' he asked.

"'There was a pause. Then she said, 'Because,' and I heard a smile riding on her voice. 'I just got done breaking the damned thing, darling. Is that reason enough?'

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* * *

The emperor pauses, managing a few weak breaths.

"Lucian started to run," he continues. "I knew he would, and I thought I was ready, but I couldn't stay with him. He reached the machine and Theresa maybe thirty seconds ahead of me, and by the time I arrived, he was flinging her against the steel barrel, screaming incoherently, then regaining just enough composure to threaten her in the most horrible, unspeakable ways.

"I ran up and stopped short.

"She was crying. Melting, and dying. Give your life and soul to another person, and there is nothing for you when the end arrives. I know this. Not like Theresa knew it. But even for me, standing in that bright sunshine, wiping away my own tears . . . I felt a sense of withering loss that years later still slices through me. . . .

"'Fix it!' Lucian screamed.

"Theresa said, 'No. I won't.'

"Then he made his next error. He turned to her cowering staff, and he asked them, 'Can you fix the problem?'

"One of the low-ranking technicians nodded nervously, claiming, 'I think I can.'

"'Do it. Now!' Then he took the palm of his hand, delivering a staggering blow to the traitor before him. He dropped Theresa to the deck, and he kicked her face, and finally, I jumped and grabbed at him, begging him to stop.

"He said, 'Get away from me!'

"Theresa pulled herself into a fetal position, trying to protect her bloodied eyes.

"'What did you think you could do?' he roared at her. 'Any one of your people can run this machine. What the fuck good do you think you were doing?'

"Then the other hands started to grab at him.

"Grab at his arms, his legs.

"We carried him away, squeezing the fight out of him, warning him to shut up and behave. And only then, finally, did Lucian notice who was attached to those grabbing hands. The inner circle. In secret, I'd brought all of them with me on the *Veritas*. I'd slipped them aboard his ship by telling the bodyguards that this was just another surprise pizza party for the emperor. They had watched everything from the dance hall; a tiny camera and microphone were hidden in my clothes. They were the richest men and women in this world, and they were helping me carry the most powerful . . . and we finally dropped him into his favorite chair, and Lucian looked up at us . . . and that's when he stopped being anything but expendable. . . ."

XIII

Another pause.

Sweat emerges from the fresh makeup, beads up and rolls into the left eye. The emperor removes the moisture with a shaking finger, and then he says, "The official account is that Lucian asked to be sent into the future. And that is, mostly, a true story. He wasn't called back to the twenty-first century by a brother god. That story is told with a little bit too much gusto for my taste. But in the end, Lucian found enough poise to ask for a specific

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date, and we put him on a suicide watch and brought him back here. By then, Theresa had the ChronoAble working again. The machine and a portion of its sensors were loaded into the Hum-vees and trucked to Rome. It was night. The Forum had been cleared and sealed. Our emperor was allowed his chance to say some final words, and after a moment's hesitation, he looked at me and smiled, saying, 'Wherever I end up, I'll be famous. Don't you think, old buddy?'

"I didn't say one word to him.

"Really, by that point, I couldn't get rid of Lucian fast enough."

Now he pauses again, looking at the woman as he shakes his head. Then she says, with genuine feeling, "I wish I could have known my father."

"How old were you when the Christians killed him?"

"Less than a year," she admits.

"Well, Sarah," the emperor offers, "your father lived a good life and he died well. Despite those rumors that he was a traitor against Lucian, I assure you: Your father was nothing but a good loyal servant of an occasionally noble cause."

He sighs, glancing at Octavian now.

"Theresa sent Lucian into the future. The sensors absorbed and analyzed the flash, and this is what they showed us." He reaches under the table, bringing up a small folder in which is a single photograph. The image shows Rome in another two thousand years. "Of course this is just one possibility," the emperor cautions. "The best mathematicians in every world can't compute the total number of futures, just in our timestream."

Octavian has seen the picture many times, but it never fails to astonish him. A city of glass or diamond hangs in the air above a well-preserved set of marble ruins. The ruins are reworked versions of today's forum. Each of the crystal buildings is suspended by invisible means. And visible in the sky between two of those marvels is a green and blue and cloud-clad moon.

A moment passes.

"Theresa decided to return to the *Virtue,*" the emperor mentions. "She would take the ChronoAble with her, and a tiny crew—enough bodies to make a short voyage. 'I'm jumping back to a few minutes after we arrived here,' she explained. 'I'm going to talk to Lucian. I'm going to talk to myself. I'll do my best to warn them that things will get awful, if they aren't careful.'

"I pointed out that it wouldn't accomplish much. Jumping back wouldn't change *our* past; it would just create another messy timestream.

"But she was ready for me. Quietly, with a weary authority, she explained, 'Every move that we make in this world creates endless new futures. And every move that we don't make does the same.'

"She said to me, 'Johnny, I can only do so much, and that's what I'm going to do. Good-bye now. And good luck with your empire.' "

The emperor leans forward, only the marble table keeping him from falling out of his chair. Yet no one moves to help him. His exhaustion is so natural, so gentle and calm and inevitable, that it acquires a kind of beauty that stifles every impulse to help the man.

"*My* empire," he says.

He says, "With the rest of the inner circle, I went to Ostia, and together, we watched the flash of light that came as Theresa left our world. She took the ChronoAble and its sensors, and the great ship *Virtue,* and read any symbolism that you want into the ship's name. She was gone. We were no

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longer a time-crossing people, and we won't be again for another century or two.

"My empire," he says with a mystified pleasure. Then he manages to smile, telling the cameras, "I turned to the others then. To my old college friends. And I asked, 'Would anyone object if I tried running things for now?'

"There were no real objections.

"And for thirty years, that is exactly what I have done."

XIV

The journalist waits for a moment, and then tells her emperor, and everyone in her vast, invisible audience, "You have done wonderful things for Rome, your excellence. Wonderful, glorious things."

Colfax won't argue the point. He allows himself a grin, and with the smallest of shrugs, adds, "I've had my share of help, of course."

He says, "Octavian," and looks over at his associate.

"Your excellence," Octavian replies. Still seated at the table, he manages a little bow, and then with a customary fervor, he adds, "And you will continue to guide Rome for many, many years to come."

"Doubtful," says the emperor.

Then he laughs, and with altogether too much ease, he coughs. He coughs and wipes his mouth with his cotton cloth, finding another thread of blood in his mouth. Sadly, he shakes his head. "No more smallpox," he says. "Cholera and plague are on the run. But despite all of our careful quarantines, we managed to bring the HIV virus. And of course, it got loose in the brothels, and spread, and it was already everywhere before we realized the scope of the epidemic."

He sets down the cloth, piling his hands on top of it.

"Which leads to another fine question. Why am I ill with this scourge? I've had few sexual partners in the last thirty years, and each of them remains healthy and virus-free. My doctors are skilled and loyal, or so I've been led to believe. Of course there might have been opportunities for someone who wants me dead. An injection of tainted blood. A dentist with a filthy implement. Or maybe, a needle hidden in my bed sheets, ready to deliver its slow, fatal cargo."

Octavian feels the eyes staring at him. He sits motionless, wondering when the accusation will finally come. For several years, he has waited for the dying emperor to single him out. But he has never imagined the moment looking like this, with cameras watching, and strangers, and the sick old man leaning across the table to place his bloody cloth into Octavian's opened hands.

The Roman knows enough to fear that bright red blood.

But he is enough of a Roman to ignore his terror, calmly folding the cloth while saying, "You are tired, your excellence. We could rest until tomorrow—"

"No," the emperor interrupts. "Really there's not much more to say, and I want to say it. Now."

Forrester's daughter glances at Octavian, and then stares at the emperor. "Whatever you wish to say," she begins.

"In a few centuries," the old man begins, "we will reinvent the time machines. And eventually, there will be enough of them, and they will be fancier than our ChronoAble . . . and anyway, our descendants will be able to look

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back along our timestream with an unparalleled accuracy. With enough sensors deployed, future people will be able to study the past in astonishing detail, and there won't be any secrets anymore. Every charity and every treachery . . . they still exist in the past, waiting to be dragged into the light. . . .

"Which, I think, is a lovely, perfect way to build a universe."

He rises, surprisingly vigorous for a man in his sorry condition. Then he steps around the table and clasps a hand on Octavian's shoulder, remarking, "If you were the one who poisoned me . . . well, so be it. So be it."

Octavian starts to rise, to voice his passionate dissent.

"I can understand," says the emperor, using his taller frame to hold his associate in his chair. "Really, it would have been reasonable of you. You're not getting younger, and I might have lived another twenty years. You were born to rule Rome and the Empire. And honestly, at this point, you would do a better job of it than I can. Because that's what you do on the typical day. I'm little more than a figurehead, and you are the true soul of this state."

Octavian trembles. He can't help himself.

The emperor turns to the woman, and he says, "Sarah, I have to apologize again. This interview has a second, much more important purpose. I have no heir. I never married, and for every good reason. But I wanted cameras here to record my public announcement. I want to adopt the man who will replace me as emperor when I die. Any day now, perhaps."

"Your excellence," Octavian sputters.

"It is you, my friend," he says, smiling down at his associate. "By my word, you are now my son and only heir. . . !"

"But if . . . I mean . . . if you really believe that I had any role in making you sick. . . !"

"Shut up, Octavian." The emperor leans against the table, a sudden fever rushing through him. But he finds the energy to remark, "An old friend once told me, 'History is millions of people telling an elaborate, self-serving story.'"

Then he shakes his head, adding, "You did this thing or you did not. But first, I have a duty toward Rome, and, in truth, I don't want to ugly up my last moments of life by falling into some palace intrigue."

He winks.

Octavian sits back in the chair, waiting now.

The emperor sits back in his chair, and with a slow wet voice, he says, "Remember where I began my story? In that dorm room, with Lucian?" And he laughs gently, shaking his head as he wonders aloud, "In how many rooms did nothing happen? How many times did Lucian dismiss his crazy thought, and how many times did I tell him, 'You're an idiot, and shut up'?"

He says, "History is a maze."

Then with a wise, sorry shake of the head, he admits, "Everything that can happen, *does*. Which should, I think, make us all the more eager to find what is true and decent, and celebrate it with all our feeble breath. . . !" ○

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JUNE 2002

7–9—**DucKon.** For info, write: **Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect) **(Web) www.duckon.org. (E-mail) info@duckon.org.** Con will be held in: Schaumburg (Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include: Joan Vinge, J. D. (Illiad) Frazer.

7–9—**Trek Celebration. (913) 441-9405.** Sheraton, Framingham MA. W. Shatner. Commercial Star Trek event.

7–9—**Eclipse. www.midgard.demon.co.uk/nocturnal/frmstl.htm.** London UK. A. Head, R. Sachs. Media horror.

7–10—**Australia Nat'l. Con. www.home.vicnet.net.au/~converge.** Cato Centre, Melbourne Australia. Haldemans.

8–9—**RecaCon. Reca1990@hotmail.com.** Los Medanos College, Pittsburg. G. Poitras, Mrs. Brown. Anime.

9–July 20—**Clarion. www.msu.edu/~clarion.** MI State U., E. Lansing MI. Bisson, Fowler. Writing workshop.

10–July 19—**Odyssey. (603) 673-6234.** NH College, Manchester NH. Jeanne Cavelos. Writing workshop.

14–15—**Deadly Ink. www.deadlyink.com. pab@nac.net.** Sheraton, Parsippany NJ. Mystery fiction.

14–16—**Bloody Words. www.bloodywords.com.** Delta Chelsea, Toronto ON. Peter Robinson. Mystery fiction.

14–16—**DeepSouthCon. www.con-stellation.org.** Hilton, Huntsville AL. Allen Steele, C. Willis, B. Eggleton, S. Green.

14–16—**ConSortium. www.con-sortium. info@con-sortium.org.** Radisson, Houston TX.

14–16—**Anime Mid-Atlantic. www.animemidatlantic.com.** Holiday Inn Edger Center, Richmond VA. S. Frazier.

14–16—**Homecoming. www.midgard.demon.co.uk/nocturnal/frmstl.htm.** Glasgow UK. A. Head. Media horror.

14–17—**Relax.aCon. www.ericlindsay.com/relaxa.con.** Whitsunday Terraces Resort. Airlie Beach, Australia.

15–16—**Sci-Fi Expo & Toy Show. (972) 578-0213. scifiexpo@aol.com.** Grapevine TX. Media-oriented swap con.

21–23—**ConJuration. Box 874, Columbia MO 65205. (573) 268-3811.** D. Weber, R. Knaak, K. Berdak, J. L. Nye.

21–23—**ConTata. c/o 7312 35th Av. #D25, New York NY 11372. contata2002@excite.com.** SF/fantasy folksinging.

21–23—**Monster Bash. Box 213, Ligonier PA 15658. (724) 238-6436.** Days Inn, Butler PA. Chapman. Media horror.

21–23—**SFX Event. 30 Monmouth St., Bath BA1 2BW, UK. (+44 01225) 788-215.** Norbeck Castle, Blackpool UK.

21–23—**Trek Celebration. 4623 Aminda, Shawnee Mission KS 66226. (913) 441-9405.** Radisson ORD, Chicago IL.

21–23—**Trek Expo. 2130 S. Sheridan, Tulsa OK 74129. (913) 838-3388.** Expo Sq., Tulsa OK. Commercial event.

21–24—**Book Expo Canada. 383 Main Ave., Norwalk CT 06851. (800) 840-5614.** Toronto ON. Book trade only.

28–30—**Gathering of the Gargoyles. 508 W. Plantation Rd., VA Beach VA 23454.** Holiday Inn, Williamsburg VA.

29–30—**Sci-Fi Expo & Toy Show. Box 94111, Plano TX 75094. (972) 578-0213.** Arlington TX. Media swap con.

JULY 2002

4–7—**WesterCon. Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. www.westercon.org/55.** Radisson LAX, Los Angeles, CA. Big.

5–7—**InConJunction. Box 68514, Indianapolis IN 46268. www.inconjunction.org.** Sheraton. R. Hatch, L. Bond.

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose. Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose.org.** San Jose CA. The WorldCon. $180.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3. Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** WorldCon. C$220/US$145.

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OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Multiple Hugo and Nebula winner **Robert Silverberg**, one of the giants of the field, takes us to an alternate history where Rome never fell, and Roman legions are now gearing up to conquer the New World on the other side of the Atlantic—and finding that they may have bitten off a bit *more* than they can chew, in the suspenseful story of what happens to "The Second Wave"; best-selling author **William Barton** returns after too long an absence to paint a gripping and compelling picture of some bizarre far-future space-faring posthumans trying to puzzle out how "The Engine of Desire" drives the world along; acclaimed author **William Sanders**, whose classic "The Undiscovered" was one of our most popular stories a few years back, delivers a hard-eyed and uncompromising look at a fateful afternoon that could change history forever, for better *or* worse, in the suspenseful "Duce"; hot new writer **Daniel Abraham** invites us to dip into a poignant box of "Ghost Chocolate"; and **Louise Marley**, author of *The Terrorists of Irustan* and *The Glass Harmonica*, making her *Asimov's* debut, lets us listen in on some of the unforgettable—and scary—things that "Jamie Says."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column warns us against "Burning Science at the Stake"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column exposes us to "The Horror, the Horror"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our August issue on sale at your newsstand on July 9, 2002, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable electronic formats, at our *Asimov's* website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we've got coming up for you this year! And don't forget that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a **great** present at **any** time of the year, not just at Christmas time!

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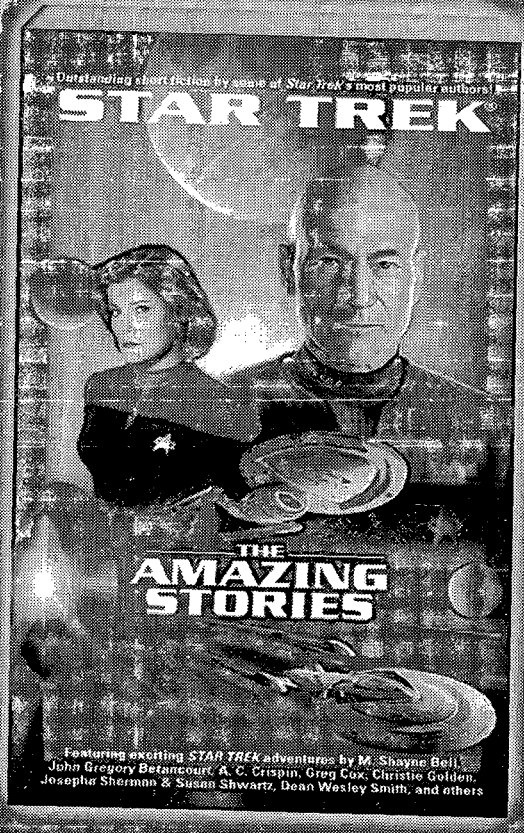
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